SQUAD

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by

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DEDICATED
TO THE INFANTRY SQUAD FILES OF THE
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
OUT OF WHOSE LIVES AND DEATHS
THIS SQUAD HAS BEEN FASHIONED

THE SQUAD

Ole Anderson, a Swedish-American rancher from the Texas Panhandle.

Stanley G. Allen, American, a high school youth from San Francisco.

James Marzulak, Serb, a miner from Coal Valley, Pennsylvania.

Harvey Whittaker, American, from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Emmanuel Waglith, Jewish proprietor of a shoe store in the Bronx, New York.

Giuseppe Novelli, from "Little Italy," South Eighth Street, Philadelphia.

Michael O'Connors, itinerant Irish-American worker.

Hugh Gray, American, graduate of Center High School, Columbus, Ohio.

SQUAD

I

". . . Anderson."
"YO!"
"Allen."
"HO!"
"Marzulak."
"HUP!"
"Whittaker."
"HO!"
"Waglith."
"HYA!"
"Novelli."
"UMMM!"
"O'Connors."
"HA-OWW!"
"Gray, Corporal."
"HERE!"

It is the last formation of the day—Retreat—with a battalion of infantry lined along the road of a village in the Pas de Calais, France, at early evening in the Spring of 1918.

"Sounds like a menagerie!" shouts the Lieutenant in command of the Fourth Platoon of M Company. "Can't you answer to roll call like soldiers? You've got to . . ."

His sentence is cut off by the note of a bugle at the end of the village road. Grins that began to widen mouths vanish off faces as the line sinks rearwards, just perceptibly, into Parade Rest. The bugler trills out *Retreat.*

"Platoon—ten-shun!" The Lieutenant looks towards the left of the Platoon front.

"You've got to buck up there on the end of the line. Just because you're the Last Squad of the Fourth Platoon of M Company, the tail of the Regiment, you needn't try to be the worst . . . 'Spection —Harms!"

The bolts of the rifles click.

"Dis-missed!" The Lieutenant whips out the final command and turns away.

"Aw, what th' hell does it matter how we answer, 's long's we're all here?" grumbles O'Connors, as the Platoon breaks up. "A man's an individjul, not a goddam phonograph."

"An' I guess we aren't any worse than the rest of the Platoon," Waglith adds. "He chust picks on us 'cause we're at the end of the line."

With rifles at trail, the Squad straggles up the road and into billets, an outhouse which flanks a littered courtyard. In the outhouse are two cowstalls, now lined with straw. The soldiers toss their rifles, belts, helmets and gas masks on the straw-beds, grab mess kits out of packs and hurry back along the

village road, where they form up into a platoon file —the chow line.

They clatter mess kits as they wait impatiently for the mess detail which approaches with two huge marmite cans and a pasteboard tub. Tin cup in one hand, mess can and lid in the other, knife, fork and spoon poking out of blouse pocket, each soldier files by the servers and gets a half-pint of weak tea, a can-ful of Maconochie, two thin slabs of bread and a spoonful of marmalade. They eat, sprawled on the grass along the edge of the road.

"Corp'ril," drawls Anderson, a lanky six-footer from the Panhandle, "Ah'm agonna waste awaiy an' die if Ah don' get a beefsteak soon. Ah've los' thuty poun's alraidy. Ah'm used tuh eatin'. Out'n ahr country we eat three meals a daiy. This stuff ain't a meal. It's tea waash."

"You said it, Shorty," says Waglith. "These bloody Britishers don't know how to eat. Tea and cham, cham and tea. That's all they know the names of. It's *terrible*. Even goldfish'd look good now."

"But look at that goddam hunky," shouts O'Connors, pointing at Marzulak, who has a pair of fried eggs on his mess pan lid. "He gits enough to eat."

O'Connors glares at the Serb.

"Where'd you git them eggs from?"

"Saved my monies an' buyed 'em, like you oughta do," Marzulak answers calmly. "You get same pays

I does. Always plenty eat when got jack. See dat" —and he tips his cup—"dat's milk, fresh milk."

"Yer a goddam bohunk!" shouts O'Connors, irritated further by the sight of the fresh food he hasn't got and can't buy. "An' you can't speak th' langwidge."

"Say, Mike, I heard to-day that payday's due day after to-morrow," Gray, the Corporal, puts in quickly, anxiously. Secretly, Gray is a bit afraid of the big Irishman, with his 200 pounds of bullying flesh, for he knows he could kill him with his bare fists.

"An' I shave in hot water, too," Marzulak goes on persistently. "De trouble wid you's you don' know how make friends wid de Frogs."

"You squarehead!" O'Connors spits out threateningly. "Wit' Confederate money's how you make friends, I guess." *

"Take it easy, Mike," Gray cautions. "We're going to war soon an' you'll get all the scrap you want."

"An' fizz-water costs only five francs a bottle over at d' estaminet—for dem's got de five francs," Marzulak goes on tauntingly.

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* O'Connors refers to the fact that some American soldiers carried worthless Confederate notes to France, which they passed on the unsuspecting French peasantry as legal United States currency.

"Shut up, Marzulak!" shouts Gray. "What in hell do you want to pick a scrap for?"

"It's th' food causes thet, Corp'ril," Anderson drawls. "Fellah cain't help bein' scrappy on this kinda stuff."

"Awright," O'Connors growls. "I'll pipe down, but if payday ever comes I'm gonna have eggs too."

He spits and strikes the road close by Waglith's feet.

"Say, Mike, I'm sittink here," the latter shouts.

"Guy's gotta spit somewhere, fer Christ's sake," O'Connors answers. "There's too goddam many soldiers around here fer th' country."

With that, the Squad mates lapse into the avid eating of the slender supper. Finished, they light cigarettes, wash mess kits in a bucket of warm, soapy water left on the roadside, and drift away.

It is early summer. From the blue sky comes the lazy drone of an airplane. Across the top of a line of low, green hills, the sun throws a mild light over the red-tiled roofs of the village. Around it stretch neat, cultivated fields, hedges and tall trees spaced evenly along a straight, white road.

A peasant woman, with a clatter of sabots, switches a cow through the village. Two old men with bent backs and crooked legs—one with a rake over his shoulder—gesticulate and jabber as they walk slowly

along the road. A barefoot, besmocked urchin passes with a milk can and a long loaf of bread. And behind him is one who kicks out his legs, and laughs gleefully, as he rides picka-back on a doughboy.

Outside the Squad billet, O'Connors, Waglith and Novelli lie sprawled on the cool grass.

"Jesus, it feels good to stretch out after drillin' over them bloody fields all day," says O'Connors. "How 'bout you, Novelli?"

The Italian doesn't answer. He only grins, takes his cigarette out of his mouth and spits.

"Ain't much fer talkin', th' Eyetalian, is he?"

"No, Mike, you do that for all of us."

"Some one's gotta. So I'm th' goat, huh? . . . But, say, Novelli, what're you called, anyhow?"

"Giuseppe."

"Huh?"

"Gi-u-seppe."

"Awright, Joseffi'll do fer you. Where you from, anyhow, Joseffi?"

"Philadel-phi-a."

"Oh-ho, that's why yer so backward wit' th' langwidge, huh?"

"Can't you do better'n that, Mike," puts in Waglith.

"I'll admit it's old, but I guess it's new to him," and O'Connors jerks his thumb towards the silent Italian.

"Mike," says Waglith, meditatively. "Ain't it a queer woild, though. In New Yawk you go to the chair if you kill a guy, but up where we're goink they take off the'r hat to you. The more you kill the merrier. Ain't that queer? I can't get it. Can you?"

"Me? I ain't interested in yer philosophy, Mose, fer I got a real trouble I can't git," O'Connors answers. "Listen, I got a lousy wife back in th' States. Now, th' Guv'ment deducts $10 every month outa my pay fer that wumman. An', hell, she lives outside o' Camp McClellan an' makes more'n that every night outa them soldiers back there. Ain't it a hell of a war, when a feller makin' an honest $30 a mo's gotta fork out near half of it to support a goddam whore—when he ain't gittin' nothin' from her! Can you git that, Mose?"

The other two laugh.

"You're too sentimental, Mike, why'd you marry her?" Waglith asks.

"Well, I didn't know she wuz a tart. I picked 'er up one Sunday afternoon in Anniston, an' I wanted to do th' right thing by her before comin' overseas. Can't blame me fer that, can you? An' that's what I git out of it . . . Say, where's Shorty?"

"Over the way, writink a luff letter," says Waglith.

Across the courtyard, sitting on a wooden box,

with pad and pencil on his knee, is Anderson. His hand works slowly, painstakingly, with a circular motion.

"Dear Famley [he writes] I form you these few lines to let you know I am in good health and hope you are the same at home. Mother please excuse me for not writing sooner to you all. Sister I hope you and Jerry are in good health at home. Give my Aunts and Uncles my best regards. Mother I am somewhere in Suney France. Mother i am getting fat since I came in to the army . . . [he pauses]

"Hell, might as well saiy so," and he goes on with the letter.

". . . I drill eight hours a day with a gun on my side. Mother don't worry about me for I am well taken keare of here. Father I hope you are in good health and working every day xxxxx kisses xxxxx Mother I went to church and said a prayer for all in the famley at home and one for Grandma Bryan and Grandpa Thompson. Mother tell Emmily I think a hold lot of her for if I lose her my heart would brake. Yours respt. Ole."

He folds the sheet carefully, addresses a Y.M. C.A. envelope, puts it in his pocket and goes off down the road to hand it to the Company Commander for censoring.

Gray and Marzulak sit outside the estaminet, each

with a *Cointreau* on the table before him. Opposite is a diminutive Tommy, a member of a battalion of the Royal Scots, with a tam o' shanter raked across one ear.

"What's it like up there, anyhow?" asks Gray.

"Ow, hit's orful. You bloody well cawn't describe it with words. Hit's not so much the bullets and whizbangs you minds, but the 'ardships. They're terrible. The 'ikin' and double-timin' with full kit, the rain and the mud. That's what takes the stomach out of a bloke. The only good thing about it all's the gin ration. Hit's that wot saves the day. I never seen a bloke yet wot got mentioned in orders, or a bloomin' horficer wot got the Cross unless he got blotto first. See, I got a ribbon meself, but I don't know to this day wot I did."

"Aw, well, I'm ready," says Marzulak. "I'm sick o' trainin' and drillin'. We bin trainin' now nine mont's a'ready back in de States."

"Ow, that's nothin'," the Englishman replies. "I've been in the bloody Harmy since I was sixteen and I'm twenty-seven this year."

"Jesus!" exclaims the Serb. "You oughta know yer job."

"But you'll be goin' up bye-the-bye, to get a taste of it for yourselves . . . Heigho . . . Must be gettin' back to billets now. Cheerio, Yanks!"

"Let's turn in, too, Jim," says Gray, just after the Englishman leaves.

"Awright."

Side by side, the two walk through the darkening village.

"Wonder what it's going to be like, Jim?" Gray breaks the silence.

"Won't know 'til we get dere, I guess."

"Think that Englishman was just stuffing us, or that it is so bad you can't tell how bad it is?"

"Dunno, Corp, but I wanta see it. An' I don' care what happens to me. I'm gonna get killed or I'm gonna get a lotta Heinies. I've had a lotta life a'ready. It don' mean much to me no longer."

"Wish I could feel like that, Jim, I'm sort of scared of it all."

"Dat's nat'trel, Corp. Yer young yet. But you'll pull troo. Don' let it get yer goat."

"No, but a fellow can't help wondering?"

As they approach the billet, from a pup tent pitched on the grass outside—where Whittaker and Allen bunk apart from the others—comes the harmony of two mournful voices:

"I wanta go home, I wanta go home,
Th' bullets they whistle, th' cannons they roar.
I don't wanta go to th' trenches no more.
Ship me over th' sea,
Where th' Allemand can't get at me:
Oh my, I'm too young to die,
I wan-ta—go—ho-o-o-me."

"Can it, you guys!" calls Gray, as he and Marzulak turn into the outhouse. "You give me the willies."

"An' what you know 'bout trenches, you high school boys?" the Serb adds.

Inside the cowstalls, the others are asleep. Gray and Marzulak take off shoes and leggins and bed down silently in the straw.

"Say, Jim," Gray calls in a whisper, "I feel a hell of a long way from home to-night."

"You may, Corp, but fer me home's wherever I am."

"Yeah?"

Silence, and again Gray breaks it:

"I guess you're right, Jim. The Last Squad's got to be home now, huh?"

The Serb doesn't reply. Gray takes his eyes off the rafters overhead and closes them.

Along the road, soldiers straggle back to billets and the village settles into sleep.

Far away, towards the northeast, a faint light glows on the horizon above a faint rumble.

2

All night a long troop train rolls and buckles across the northeast of France. The infantry inside sleeps stretched out on straw spread over the floors

of the box cars, and with heads on the round rolled packs as pillows.

"Ah cal'cate we're better off'n the officers at thet," says Anderson, just after daybreak, as he and O'Connors dangle their legs over the sill of the open door of the box car. "When we went up tuh mess las' night Ah seen 'em sittin' eight strong to a com-partiment. They cain't lie down nohow, thetawaiy. It ain't swell here, but yuh cain't kick at th' comfort."

"An' I ain't sorry to be clear o' them English, Shorty," says O'Connors. "An' the'r dam' grub. I guess we'll do better from now on. Where you think we're goin', anyhow?"

"Hell, Ah ain't got no ahdea . . . Saiy, thet's good enough land, looks like, but what a cockeyed waiy tuh farm."

The Texan is used to crops and cattle in the Panhandle.

"Look how they plaints a two-by-fo' strip o' potatoes an' alongside anotheh strip o' onions, tomatoes an' so on! What's th' ahdea o' thet? An' they don' use no fences, no wire. How in hell yuh reckon they keeps th' cattle out?"

"There's how they keep th' cattle out." O'Connors points. "By havin' every cow an' heifer policed by a kid er a wumman. They ain't got nothin' better to do'n that. Christ, ain't it a funny country?"

A panorama of tilled fields, orchards and villages

rolls by. Hay lies in cocks stippled across the fields. Potatoes are in flower and the blossoms of fruit trees whiten the ground of orchards. The sun throws long shadows across the dewy country, while the smoke of breakfast fires spirals lazily out of the wide chimneys of farmhouses. Shutters are flung open and doors gape. Peasants appear in the barnyards, piled high with cowdung. Carts and wagons move out along the roads.

"Th' train goes so dam' slow it's jus' like we was walkin' along a road. Fellah cain see everythin'. An' it don't look much like Texas, thet's shuah."

"Right, Shorty, but . . . when do we eat?" O'Connors yawns and turns towards the prostrate bundles in the car. "Come on, you guys, hit th' deck, th' day's on!"

As he says it, the train trundles off onto a siding and the locomotive shrieks to a halt. The Lieutenant appears outside, shouting:

"Pile out, Fourth Platoon, an' go up forward for mess. In a half-hour form up outside your cars with full pack."

"Well, we've gotten theah, or else we're agonna help out this pore, overburdened train with ahr laigs," Anderson interprets the orders.

Twenty minutes later, down the line of box cars, soldiers grunt into packs, sling rifles over shoulders and swing into route step along a wide, white road

that leads into a town. As the column passes through the cobbled streets, the soldiers try to read the meaning of the signs over the shop fronts: *Epicerie, Boulangerie, Papeterie, Boucherie* . . .

"Say, Squad," says Allen. "Ain't it a good thing we got all we need on our backs? If we had to buy anything we'd never know where to get off at."

"*Estaminet,*" O'Connors reads over a corner shop. "I know what I c'n buy there."

Children run out from houses and tag along on the outside of the column.

"*Américains—souvenirs—cigarettes?*"

The soldiers toss out cigarettes and spare buttons, and the urchins hand them roses, which they stick in the muzzles of their rifles, to wilt in the dust ground up by the steel-shod shoes. The children chatter and laugh. One, a precocious, tow-headed boy, reels off incomprehensible words.

"He's kiddin' you, Allen," says Marzulak. "He's callin' you dirty names."

"Is he?" Allen asks, and looks towards the youngster: "Are you, kid? You needn't think you're so smart, for Icantalkenglishjustasfastasyoucantalkfrench."

"Haw, haw, Allen, you get th' pink derby . . . Wow! Lookit th' skirts!"

For women and men come to shop doors, lean out

of house windows, straighten up from work along the roads and in the fields.

"*Ah, les Américains!*" they exclaim. "*Sont jeunes, quoi?* And what a stride they take! *Oh, les gaillards!*"

"*Bon jour, Américains!*" and they smile and wave at the column.

"Huh, they seem glad to see us," says O'Connors. "Maybe they need us up for'ard."

"Maybe they do," Gray answers. "Say, do you realize we haven't read a line about the war since we left New York, two months ago now?"

"The war could be over for all we know," adds Waglith.

"Swell chance o' that!"

For hours the troops maintain the route march, moving twenty out of every thirty minutes. When a whistle blows, the infantrymen fall out on the side of the road and for ten minutes sprawl against the support of packs. The whistle blows again. They grunt to their feet and the march goes on. Towards each halt, the column of squads straggles, while the officers and sergeants move up and down on its outside and shout:

"Close up—close up—close up—don't straggle!"

Anderson, one of those who drags behind, looks down at his feet;

"Dogs, hol' up. Don' go back on me. Me an' this wa', we've need o' yuh."

"What's the trouble, Shorty, you too big to keep up?" asks Allen.

"Ain't thet, boy, ain't mah size, but mah dam' lef' foot. Big toe's missin' theah wheah a hoss once step' on it."

"What you think, Shorty?" Waglith looks around over his shoulder. "Last halt I asked the pill-roller to fix me up fur a blister on my big toe and he gimme C.C. pills. What you think of that fur medicine?"

"All I gotta say, Waglith," O'Connors breaks in, "is you oughta know a lot more about shoes an' feet if you ever git back to that Cheap John shoe store o' yers on East a Hundred an' Eighty-nint' Street."

"Sure think, Mike, I'm gonna get back. And I'm gonna sell you a pair of shoes—by size and weight."

"Wrong, Mose, you ain't goin' back. You're gonna push up daisies over here. I feel it in my Irishman's bones."

"Aw, quit kiddink."

By late afternoon the column passes through a village, turns off the road and files into a park. Château de Chaumesnil—the soldiers read—cut into the stone gateposts. The infantry pitches pup tents in long lines paralleling the rose bushes that border the gravel path which leads up to the square, cream-

colored house. Hay has just been made and the infantrymen loot the cocks to make soft, warm beds for themselves. As long shadows cut across the park, they sit before open tents, drawing brush and thong through the bores of rifles, sliding bayonets in and out of the ground to shine the blade, scraping mud and dust off shoes with wisps of hay.

"Say, fellows, isn't that the Eiffel Tower!" exclaims Whittaker, who leans over a stone wall which marks the boundary of the château park. "Look, there, through the haze! Say, we must be close to Parus!"

They quit their tasks and line the stone wall.

"By God, if it ain't Parus!"

"Here's one's goin' A.W.O.L. to-night!"

"Me too, Mike, I go with you?" asks Marzulak.

"Right, Jim," O'Connors answers, the incident of the fried eggs long since forgotten.

"Parus—hell," drawls Anderson. "Ah seen a jane down t' th' café on th' corner suits me right enough. Why go so fa' awaiy when yuh got it close t' hand?"

"Yer a hick, Shorty, 'course you ain't got no business goin' to Parus. You wouldn't know how to take care o' yerself. You'd lose yer all."

"Hick, hell—Ah ain't a-goin' tuh git in trouble over nothin'."

"You call Parus nothin'? That proves yer a hick."

Marzulak and O'Connors stow rifles and equipment in tents and commence to clean up.

"That wuz kind o' th' Army now, wuzn't it?" says O'Connors, as he kneels before his pup tent, looks into a tiny mirror tacked onto the tent pole, and scrapes a razor across his face. "To pay us th' day before we left billets an' not give us a chanct to spend a franc 'til we got to Parus."

"Dam' right, Mike," Marzulak replies. "We've got fifteen bucks each blow to-night. Guess de girls'll look at us even if we ain't so classy dressed." The Serb washes his issue Gillette in his drinking cup, takes a comb out of his pocket, wets and slicks his hair.

After mess, Marzulak and O'Connors disappear over the stone wall and Anderson goes off to the village. Gray and the others walk about the château, its windows boarded up, vines overgrowing its porte-cochère, and its grounds grown up into field grass. Behind, they discover a large pond, a swimming pool with concrete borders.

"I'll bet there were parties here in the old days," comments Whittaker. "Men and women going in swimming together without any clothes on. I read a book once about the kinda parties they used to have in France when there were kings and queens. Gee, they must 'a' been great!"

"Yep, they must've been," says Gray. "And that

gives me an idea I'd like a swim myself right now."

They take a look about, on the possibility that there might be some kind of caretaker at the château, then strip and plunge into the water. They come out, rub their bodies with mud and plunge in again.

"That takes the sweat off as good as soap," says Gray.

All the fatigue of the hike goes into the cool water. They dress, bodies glowing, and wander off into the village. At the café they find Anderson trying to communicate with a pretty brunnette who tends the tables. Gray knows a little French, as much as he learned out of a book—*Soldiers Spoken French*—which he studied coming over on the transport. He points at Anderson.

"*Il—vous—desire—promener*," he says to the French girl.

"*Il veut promener avec moi? Oo-la-la. Pas possible.* I must work here."

"*Quand—vous—êtes—fini?*"

"Ah, but I shan't be through until 11 o'clock."

"Get that, Shorty," says Gray. "She won't be through 'til eleven. Shall I tell her you'll wait?"

"Sure, Ah've got enough jack tuh sit here all night. It's a pleasure tuh watch her handle th' bottles. She knows her job. Only it's hard as hell tuh talk tuh her."

"*Il—reste—ici—toute—la—nuit—pour—vous,*" Gray translates.

"*Ooh-la-la, très bien.* You Americans are *gentils.*"

"Thanks fo' th' palaver, Corp. Now you bettah have a drink—one o' these Vermout' Cassies—like she recommended tuh me. It ain't like whiskey, but Ah cain taste th' likker in it all th' same."

They take a couple of drinks with Anderson, again wander out through the village, then back to the park and their tents. Gray shares his with Marzulak. He pauses with the others before its empty, triangular entrance.

"Hope I don't get in trouble with the Lieutenant about those two goin' A.W.O.L.," he says.

"Gee, Hugh, I'd like to be there in Parus with 'em," says Whittaker.

"Yeah, the Army spoils everything for us," Allen speaks up.

"Aw, why not tell the truth," says Waglith. "It's not the Army we're afraid of. It's Parus."

"It's my stripes I'm thinking of," counters Gray.

"You're all Corporal, that's the trouble with you."

"Well, I don't see you in Paris, stripes or no stripes," says Gray.

He turns away from the others and crawls into the tiny tent. He takes off his leggins and shoes, blouse and breeches and pulls a blanket over him.

"I'm tired," he says to himself. "Wonder how

those two guys can gallivant 'round Paris all night —after a hike like to-day's?" And he goes off to sleep. . . .

Hours later, he awakes at a stir beside him.

"That you, Jim?"

"Yeah, Corp, what's left o' me."

"O'Connors come back too?"

"Yeah, he wanted to stay. He got drunker'n me an' wanted to spend all night wid his skirt. I pulled him 'long back wid me. No use gettin' in trouble. . . . But, Jees, you never saw anyting like de skirts. You can't get away from 'em. You can't make no headway troo 'em on de streets. Dey grabs yer hand, purty near trow dere arms 'roun' yer neck an' make you come along. Even Mike says he never saw anyting like it, an' Mike's bin about some, I guess . . . We picked up two beauties an' went along wid 'em to dere place. Buckoo drinks—mais oui—oo-la-la—I've learned French—out uv a sleepin' dictionary—dat's what dey're called . . . An' soldiers! Dey're all dere in Parus. All but de Heinies. I don't know who c'n be fightin' dis war, wid so many 'Mericans an' Canadians an' Australians an' English an' Frenchmen back dere in Paris. . . . An' it's a won-'erful place, Corp. Taxicabs and swell-dressed janes an' drinks all over . . . I wouldn't missed dat fer anyting."

"Must be pretty near morning?"

"Yeah, it's four, but I'll sleep it off before reveille."

Marzulak's description of Paris excites Gray. He lies awake after the heavy, regular breathing of the Serb shows he is asleep.

What kind of a city can that be—he muses—where women actually touch a man on the street, attack a man, almost, if Jim isn't just talking? God, there's certainly nothing like that 'round home—not even in Cincinnati. I wouldn't mind going to Paris. Maybe, if we stay here awhile, they'll give out passes. I'd like to see if Jim's just talking.

He dozes off and dreams of Paris, its streets colored with women, women, women, all about him, in colored clothes and clothes the color of flesh, women, women, women . . .

zoom—ZOOM—Z-O-O-M

He comes awake and listens.

zoom—ZOOM—Z-O-O-M

A rhythmic beat in the sky. The cadenced beat of a motor. Then closer.

bang—swish—bang—swish—bang—swish

And high overhead.

crr-rump—crr-rump—crr-rump

He crawls to the tent opening and looks up into the moonlit sky. Along the line of tents, awed, white faces peer out.

"My God, what is it?"

"They're Boche 'planes, bombin' Parus!"

They watch the gorgeous, awesome spectacle of an aerial raid on Paris, an immense and weird battle of earth against sky.

zoom—zoom—zoom

bang—swish—bang—swish—bang—swish

BOOM—BOOM—BOOM

crr-rump—crr-rump—crr-rump

It is a medley of noise. Overhead, the cadenced beat of the motors is broken into by the countless anti-aircraft guns—the ackety-acks—that are firing all about. Flashes leap out of the darkness as the bombs crash, with a deep, blasting roar. Then comes the ugly hum and whine and smack of pieces of steel flying through the air and striking the ground. Overhead, again, sounds the ceaseless, hollow crump of shells that burst about the invisible airplanes.

Shafts of light play across the heavens, searching for the tiny specks thousands of feet overhead. They whiten the fleecy edges of clouds and occasionally catch the puny white puffs of shell-bursts. The bands of light sweep from horizon to horizon. Sometimes they criss-cross, and at that point they seem to smoke.

Z-O-O-M—ZOOM—zoom

The cadence of the motors weakens and dies away.

One by one, the guns cease fire. It leaves a deep silence.

"Holy jumpin' Jesus," comes O'Connors' voice, its thick unsteadiness awed queerly. "I thought an airplane chucked overboard somepin' 'bout th' size of a hen's egg, but those babies must bin big's a barn."

"Hey, Mike, it's dam' good we got outa Parus before dat happened," Marzulak calls in a whisper.

"Right, Jim, but do you think them skirts o' ours got knocked off? What wuz her name—mine's name —Jackaline—huh? Ain't that a purty name, Squad? An' she was a Lulu, I'll tell th' world."

"Pipe down, Fourth Platoon, an' go to sleep. Drill in th' mornin'," calls out Sergeant Jackson. "An' why tell th' whole world you've been A.W.O.L., O'Connors?"

The white faces recede into the darkness of tent mouths.

Closer now, before dawn, appears the fireline off on the northeastern horizon and the steady rumble of artillery.

3

Noon of a July day. The sun dazzles out of a cloudless sky and heats to the touch the stones that protrude through the hard macadam of the road, yellows the grass of the unfenced fields and dulls the green of orchards and woods.

Along a white road that runs away from Paris towards the northeast, a column of infantry is on the march. From under the shuffling feet rises a white cloud of dust. It envelops and follows the slow moving column, so that it seems to carry the cloud along with it, as part of itself. The dust whitens the heavy, iron-shod shoes and tightly wrapped leggins. It settles thickly over steel helmets, packs, rifles and shoulders of heavy woolen blouses. It penetrates painfully through nostrils and mouths, grits against teeth, burns throats and chokes lungs.

"'Way to the ri-ight!"

Up and down the column, carried along from man to man, comes the command. And the infantry, in column of twos, thickens towards the right of the way. Traffic passes constantly up and down the clear half of the road.

The lieutenants and sergeants weave up and down on the outside of the column. Hoarsely, they shout through the dust:

"Close up—close up—close up—don't straggle!"

And the soldiers bunch closer for a few minutes, until the natural inequality of gaits again irregularizes the column.

"Yuh-all reckon we're jus' doin' this fo' trainin'?" asks Anderson. "Or yuh reckon we're goin' somewheah?"

"Hell, yes, we're goin' somewhere," says O'Con-

nors. "Lookit them Frogs. Whadda you think—they're just goin' on vacation er what?"

A huge-wheeled cart, its two horses, in tandem, driven by an ancient peasant balanced sideways on the shafts, creaks by. On top of a mountainous load of beds, mattresses, wardrobes, chairs, tables and kitchen wear sprawls a wrinkled woman. Barefoot children follow alongside. The refugees take no notice of the troops. Their minds' eyes are filled with visions of the homes and country they've just quit.

"*Les Boches viennent, allez-y!*"

A wagon creaks by, laden heavily with bottles of beer from a village *bistro* somewhere up ahead, cleared out under the threat of war. Here, too, the driver takes no notice of the troops until O'Connors veers out from the column to snatch at a bottle. Then the Frenchman shouts terrifyingly and cracks his long whip. O'Connors ducks back into the column, while laughs and jibes pass through the Squad.

"Scared you off, huh?"

"Aw, hell, I wuz just kiddin' th' old man. Who wants to steal a bottle o' beer from a pore old Frog like that? Yet, I won't say I couldn't use a drink right now. I'm so dry I can't spit."

"It's the foist time I ever knew you to get in that condition," comments Waglith. "You're usually spittink all over me."

Come ambulances and trucks. Over the tailboards

hang filthy soldiers, in torn, muddy clothing, with red-soaked bandages on heads, shoulders and arms. They appear stupid, these wounded, with the stupidity of the mind which has met with something too colossal to comprehend.

"What's it like up dere?" Marzulak shouts out.

"Hell!"

From the rear, overtaking the infantry, dusty French camions, driven by yellow-faced Annamites in crude, goatskin coats, pound and flap by. Rolling kitchens and batteries of 75's go by with a snap of leather harness. The horses are unkempt and emaciated. Occasionally, the infantry passes a horse dying in the ditch beside the road. The war is through with the animal, cast off as it reached the end of its tether.

Ahead, low down in the sky, appear great, sausage-like balloons, turning lazily in the wind and showing on each side huge eyes of concentric red, white and blue circles. Overhead, high up, is a constant whirr of *avions*. Tiny puffs of the white smoke of shell-bursts appear about them, as they dip and fall, and climb and glide, with the rattle of their machine-guns coming faintly to earth.

At intervals along the roadside are camouflaged guns—155 mm. G.P.F.'s—manned by Frenchmen in soiled, blue uniforms mingled with the dun of civilian clothes. A sharp command. The long

snout shoots back in recoil. Flame and black smoke belch forth. An unseen projectile reverberates through the air—to burst miles away, beyond sight or sound of here, somewhere among the enemy lines.

"Close up—close up—close up—don't straggle!" the Lieutenant and the Sergeants shout as they ply up and down on the outside of the column of twos.

And again the stragglers bunch forward with an eccentric movement and hold the proper distance for a few minutes.

"Say, Mike," says Waglith. "Know what it is to-day?"

"A hell of a hike. That's easy."

"It's the Fourth of July."

"No! It ain't!"

"Dam' right it is."

"Christ, th' Army don't take no 'count o' day er night, Sundays er holidays— Some one oughta give th' Colonel a calendar."

"What'd they take awaiy arh B.V.D.'s fo'? Ah'm sweatin' like a hoss an' this lousy woolen underweah chafes like hell," says Anderson.

"My pack feels like a ball and chain—the doughboy's sentence for life," adds Allen.

"It gives me an awful kink in the back and the straps cut hell outa my shoulders," says Whittaker.

"I'd like to have th' guy that invented it here now. I'd pile th' eight packs on his goddam back

an' then whip him forward along th' road wit' bullets," O'Connors growls.

The Squad grumbles along through the hot dust. Helmets, hung over slung rifles, jangle against the barrels. Sweat pours down faces from under the O.S. caps. O'Connors and Marzulak walk side by side at the head of the Squad, the former straight but limping, the latter bent forward. Novelli and Waglith come next. The Italian, who never speaks, keeps a cigarette in his mouth—French fashion—until it burns down, when he spits it out with an adroit motion of his tongue. Waglith, with his bowed legs, rolls a bit as he goes. Gray and Allen follow, with Whittaker and Anderson straggling behind.

Suddenly, through the dust, the Lieutenant's voice breaks out angrily:

"Pick 'em up, God dam' it. If those bandoliers're missin' at th' end of th' march, you'll stand court-martial!"

Gray looks around. Whittaker has chucked his bandoliers, heavy with clips of rifle cartridges, into the ditch. Frightened, he now picks up the canvas pouches and reshoulders them. With the Lieutenant out of earshot, he mutters:

"He can talk, but what's he carrying but a pack without even a blanket roll in it."

Ceaselessly, the Lieutenant and the Sergeants ply

up and down on the outside of the column, and shout raspingly through the dust:

"Close up—close up—close up—don't straggle!"

Towards sundown the column pulls off into a patch of woods and falls out. The soldiers cast packs and hear the cookers come up from rear with a rattle. Canteens are refilled at the water cart, and two slices of bread with a chunk of corned beef are handed out.

"That's all we're gonna git, Sarge?" asks O'Connors.

"Guess so. They say there ain't time for a hot meal."

"Christ, an' after all that hikin'!"

The soldiers munch their food, cross-legged on the ground. Quickly finished, they light cigarettes and sprawl backwards, while the smoke floats upwards through the leaves patterned against the blue sky.

"Look up, Fourth Platoon!" the Squad hears the Lieutenant's voice. "I've got something to say to you. You all here? . . . All right. Now listen. Captain says we're likely going into action before morning. It's going to be a lot different from anything you've seen so far. But don't let anything get your goat. Some of you'll be killed, but so long as *you*"—and he points here and there among the lounging soldiers—"aren't killed, *you've* got to go on. Don't bother with what's happening around

you. Don't look that way. Keep your eyes ahead of you. Don't think. Just fight. Let's do as good a job as any one else. That's all."

And the Lieutenant passes along.

"I'm ready," says Marzulak. "I've hiked far enough." He draws his bayonet out of its scabbard and slips the blade in and out of the ground.

"So it's comin', huh?" and O'Connors puts his rifle across his knees, takes thong and oiler out of the butt, cleans the bore and oils the bolt mechanism. Then he looks to the cartridges in his belt, to see that each clip of five is intact.

Allen and Whittaker lie as they are sprawled. They say nothing, do nothing. Whittaker's cigarette goes out and he fails to relight it. He keeps it dead in his mouth.

Anderson limps over to the edge of the woods. "What's a shell soun' like, o' a bullet?" he asks himself. "'Fact, Ah ain't got an ahdea. An' cain those things jus' end eve'ythin'?—psst—jus' like thet? So thet th' days don' go on?"

He looks into the sunset. It is the livid, red sunset of a hot day, harbinger of a hot to-morrow. "So thet thet'll end? So thet Ah won't see thet again? A fellah jus' cain't un'erstan' it all?"

He shudders, steadies himself by clenching his fists —hard—and turns 'round to go back to the Squad. Close by, on the edge of the woods, he sees Gray.

"Ah was jus' takin' a look at th' sunset, Corp'ril. What th' Lootenant says sets a fellah thinkin'."

"Yes, it does," Gray answers absently.

"Ah kinda taken them words o' th' Lootenant tuh heart, Corp'ril. Ah've lived a rough enough life out theah in Texas, but Ah ain't seen a whole lot o' killin'. Thet was befo' mah time out theah. An' th' ahdea don' sound very good tuh me."

"Hell, Shorty, it don't sound good to me, either, but we're up against it. Best not to think much about it, I guess, like the Lieutenant said. Come on back to the Squad. We'll be movin' off soon"—he looks down at the double stripe on the left sleeve of his blouse—"an' by God, I've got to take these chevrons off!"

The Corporal sits down, tailor-fashion, among his Squad mates and rips the chevrons off his sleeve with a penknife.

"Ho, Corp," says O'Connors. "You figure you'll be more popular wit' th' Jerries if they see them stripes?"

"Well, that's what they say—that they pick off officers an' non-coms first."

"That suits me, Corp. This is goin' to be one time when I don't mind bein' last."

A whistle blows and a command circulates through the woods:

"Fall in on th' right o' th' road—column o' twos!"

Novelli and Waglith look up, close their Y.M.C.A. Bibles and slip them into packs.

The soldiers straggle out of the woods and form up along the road. Dusk comes as the column goes forward. The blazing heat of day is gone, but the dust and the process of perspiration during the afternoon now cause an intolerable thirst. Each soldier has a canteen of tepid water. They treasure it, for they don't know when they'll get it refilled. At each halt, they sip scant mouthfuls.

"Gawd, thet's good," says Anderson, at one of the halts, as he lowers his canteen and licks the moisture off his lips. "Long's thet hol's out, guess Ah cain."

"Right, Shorty," O'Connors answers. "That tastes better now'n a drink o' likker—an' that's sayin' somethin'."

As night comes, and the march goes on relentlessly, those canteens assume a monstrous value. More and more, by some quirk of fatigued minds, the soldiers measure their endurance by the capacity of their canteens. And, always, the halts become less frequent, and the pace of the column quickens.

"Jesus, this is gettink awful," Waglith complains. "What the hell's the idea of all the hurry?"

Sergeant Jackson, marching on the outside of the column of twos, answers him:

"Sniff, Waglith, d'you smell anything?"

"Yeah, somethink funny."

"That's gas. We're hurryin' like hell, th' Lieutenant says, because every night th' Dutchmen drench this area with gas shells."

They all catch the acrid odor now, which comes from the barren fields that stretch away desolately on either side of the road. Again the pace of the column quickens, yet no one straggles. No one wants to be left alone, in the dark, with that poisonous, fearful odor.

From up ahead, a man founders out of the column and doubles up in the ditch. Anderson leans over as he passes:

"What's th' trouble, buddy?"

The man mumbles unintelligibly. His eyes glisten. His face is drawn with pain.

"Cramps, Ah reckon," says Anderson, as he goes on. "Thet's a shame."

"Jesus, it's awful," some one says out of the dark. "He's just like one o' them cast-off horses we passed durin' th' afternoon."

For there is no halt. The pace doesn't even slacken. The column goes on by.

Anderson feels the gait. He feels crippled by his stride. All the joints, up and down his legs, are sore. He keeps repeating to himself—over and over—can't keep this up—can't keep this up—can't keep this up—yet he does keep it up, does go on, along with all the others. There seems to be a mass strength

from which each man borrows when he feels he has reached the limit of his own individual endurance. . . . And then the pace slackens. The column breaks, disintegrates. From head to tail, successively down the files, the soldiers fall out and flop on the side of the road. The column remains, but flattened and motionless.

"Christ, we started hikin' so long ago I fergit when it wuz," says O'Connors. "Say, Mose, wuz it to-day er yesterd'y?"

"Day before, Mike, can't you count?"

A whistle blows, quietly, and the column staggers to its feet. Now the road cuts across the top of a barren hill. Against its whiteness appear blots, vividly dark under the starlight. Dead horses lying on splotches of dried blood. Once, comes a smaller patch, like a bundle of old rags.

"We're gettin' dere," says Marzulak.

Anderson sees it out of the corner of his eye. He doesn't look closer.

"Column o' files—six paces between men!"

The command comes down the column and the soldiers know that means shell-fire.

Singly, the attenuated column files onto a wagon-trail running across bare fields. It cuts across line after line of deserted trenches and gun emplacements —active ones—with the guns sunk into the ground and camouflaged overtop with brown-green netting.

The crews move indistinctly behind the pieces, bearing shells in their arms like babies.

All about are crashes and flashes. Shells drone overhead. The air is alive with movement. Amid the reverberation of confusion, the infantry doesn't know which shells are "going" and which are "coming." It hasn't yet learned to classify shell sounds. It doesn't care, anyhow, for the column has become as an automaton. It goes forward, halts, and goes forward again mechanically, by the whistles. Minds scarcely function any longer, so great is the fatigue. No longer any talk, no longer any thoughts. Only an animal desire for the end of movement, for rest, for sleep.

A halt by the edge of a woods. The column flops. Every one falls asleep, lying in a semi-sitting position, backs and heads propped against packs. When the soldiers awake, they've lost track of time. They don't know whether they've lain there for minutes, or for hours. O'Connors gets stiffly onto his feet:

"Come on, they're goin' into th' woods."

Over endless paths, the single column winds through the woods, through thick, black patches, out into the open and comparative light, then back again into the dark. The woods reeks with the acrid fumes of gases, mingled with an odor of decayed flesh. It is near dawn now, and senses freshen. Anderson be-

comes aware that the odor is not like that of any carrion he ever smelled.

"Thet th' gas?" he wonders to himself. "Or—or —maybe human carrion has anotheh smell?"

He stumbles on dazedly—one moment out of sight of O'Connors' back—two rapid lurches forward—to catch up and feel him near.

"Gawd, Ah don' wan' git los' alone—here," he says to himself.

As he lurches along, he just misses stepping on the feet of a man lying beside the path. He lies there just as if he had dropped out of the column and fallen asleep . . . yet death seems close, all about in the gradually graying woods.

A halt, where the path, a wagon-trail, skirts the side of a steep hill.

"Dig in," says the Lieutenant, very weary, as he limps among the Fourth Platoon. "Get under ground. A barrage may drop down here any minute."

"Hell, I'm not gonna dig nowhere," O'Connors growls, after the Lieutenant passes. "Feller can't walk all night an' dig a goddam hole all day. Guy's gotta sleep sometime."

"Look at those trees, Mike." Gray points into the forest. By the daylight, the frightful scars of shell-fire appear. Trees are split and toppled to the ground, bark gashed, limbs lopped off.

They stand and kneel over packs, or squat beside them, fatigued, tempted to flop down on the ground just as they are and sleep endlessly.

Overhead, close overhead, so close that it vibrates through the hair, comes a livid, numbing scream, a roar of movement through the air. It ends in a deafening, blasting crash. It flattens every one against the ground. Stillness, for a moment, while earth falls about, and farther off, swishes and thuds sound among the trees. Human cries, agonized with fear and pain, break the suspense. Along the trail, now, soldiers are running towards and away from the place of the explosion. For a few minutes there is only confusion. At the end of a wail, a resonant voice shouts:

"First Aid Men!"

Among the soldiers milling along the wagon-trail, a couple of Red Cross brassards appear, disappear and reappear. An officer goes by, carried in the arms of two men. Blood drips from his foot. A group of soldiers struggles along awkwardly with a bundle in a shelter-half. A figure—all distorted—goes by on a litter.

"Where's th' Dressin' Station?"

"Dunno."

"Hell, Christ, where's th' Dressin' Station?"

"Up th' hill."

"No, it ain't, it's along the trail,"

"Along th' trail, all right, come on."

The seven soldiers and Corporal of the Last Squad look over their shoulders in awe. Then all of them —O'Connors too—without a word take out their entrenching tools—shovel and pick and ax—bayonets and mess kits, and dig. They bore into the side of the hill. It is new and strange to claw into the earth like that, but it comes instinctively. They feel a tremendous urge to get away from the open, to worm into the ground, to thicken clothes, and the skin of bodies, with sticks and stones and earth.

4

The sun mounts and its rays filter through the trees. The summer day warms the woods. Flies buzz, alight and crawl across faces. The shrouded forms stir. Here a hand brushes across a cheek. There a figure turns over and groans. Gray sits up in his trough of earth.

"Dam' flies won't let a fellow sleep," he mutters. He flaps aside his blanket and emerges onto the trail.

"Who wants to eat?" he calls.

Anderson awakes, rubs his eyes, rises up.

"Eeeoww," yawns O'Connors. "Here it is to-morrow an' none of us knocked off yet. Th' Lieutenant'll be disappointed, won't he?"

"Don' be anxious, Mike, we-all got plenty o' time

yet. It was hot enough fo' me at daybreak this mo'nin' fo' anotheh twenty-fo' houhs."

"Djou say somepin 'bout eatin', Corp?"

"Yep, if you two'll collect up all the canteens, we'll go off an' see what we can salvage."

"All right, Corp'ril," says Anderson, and gathers the empty canteens, pulling each one out of its canvas sack, where it lies fastened to its cartridge belt outside the several holes.

The woods is honey-combed with holes, where soldiers sleep or dig in deeper. As the Squad mates go along, they ask their way.

"Yeah, there's a stream a kilo down th' trail, by an aqueduc', an' there're rations everywhere. But, fer Gawd's sake, keep under cover. There're plenty o' Boche' planes overhead, an' if they get onto us in this woods, there'll be no end o' shellin' 'round here."

Already they see soldiers coming towards them along the trail, with dripping canteens slung on sticks across shoulders, with tubs and cans and loaves of bread.

"Come on," O'Connors urges. "I've got a terrible thirst an' a worse hunger."

The woods, just off the trail, is a havoc of abandonment. Everywhere are dugout encampments, void of life, but with no end of stores and equipment scattered about. Cookers stand with dead fires in ovens and cold pots on top. Horses lie dead, tied

to trees, with bellies ripped open by shell fragments. Everywhere are deserted field pieces, rifles, gas masks, clothes, tools, instruments and helmets, gashed and lying beside blood stains.

"Who yuh reckon pulled out'n here so sudden?"

"An engineer outfit, I guess. I see 1006th * Engineers marked on all the stuff. Guess the barrage scattered 'em."

"I'll say it scattered 'em. Th' banjo an' anchor boys ain't used to this kinda place."

"Where yuh reckon th' Fritzies are? They bin heah, yuh reckon?"

" 'Course not, when it's them laid th' barrage. Use yer ivory, Shorty."

"Thet's so. Ah reckon they mus' be a long waiy off yet. Gawd, if it's like this heah, what yuh reckon it's like when yuh git real close up?"

Farther along, beside the trail, lies that man Anderson just missed treading on before sunrise. He lies on his back, feet crossed, a splotch of dried blood on his gas mask in the alert position over his chest, its rubber mouth-piece and his two thumbs in his open mouth. The ghastly pallor and rigidity of death are over his features.

"How'd he git it, d'you guess?" asks O'Connors, pausing beside the body.

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* The Author is aware that no such regimental designation as this existed in the American Expeditionary Forces.

"Guess he got it through the chest," Gray replies.

"But why's he got his mask on—fer he must 'a' bin puttin' it on er takin' it off when he got it?"

"Hell, Mike, don't ask me!" Gray exclaims. "Let's go!"

"Yes, let's go," Anderson puts in quickly.

"That's the first dead person I ever saw, Mike," Gray says.

"Not fer me, it ain't," says O'Connors. "I've seen 'em back home. I wuz in a house one night where a feller killed a jane, an' th' jane's feller killed th' first guy. It wuz a terrible mess."

As they move off, they see an officer—silver crosses on his shoulders—coming towards them at the head of a pick and shovel detail.

"That's good," says Anderson. "Ah'd jus' as lief not see that fellah every time Ah go tuh get a drink."

"You babies better wise up," O'Connor advises. "We're in th' war now."

They come to the stream, by the aqueduct, drink and fill the canteens. They poke about among the desolation.

"We'll take everything we need," says Gray. "Looks like there'd been too many casualties 'round here for any one to come back to claim anything."

"Then here goes," O'Connors answers. "There's a good Springfield I'd ruther have than my bloody

Enfield, an' a automatic an' that shovel an' that cartoon o' cigarettes—let's see what they are—twenty thousand Omars. Jesus! Smokes enough ferever!"

"Lawd, we don' wrong tuh carry anythin' up into this woods on ahr backs. We could 'a' come up here naked an' neveh suffe'd want fo' nothin'."

They load themselves greedily with provisions—loaves of bread, cans of butter, molasses, beef, bacon, beans, coffee, milk—and bits of equipment. Each is careful to find an extra entrenching tool.

"Thet's th' handiest thin' Ah've seen yet tuh hev in this wa'," says Anderson, as he adds a long-handled shovel to the canteens and provisions piled on his shoulders.

As they arrive back at the Squad holes, Anderson turns to Gray:

"Shall Ah make this stuff up, Corp'ril? Ah done a bit o' cookin' back home."

"Go to it, Shorty."

"All right. Fetch me some twigs."

He builds a fireplace of stones, kindles a fire, heats cans of beef and beans and serves them out. Then he scrapes the cans and cooks coffee.

"Hey, yuh high school boys, don' yuh-all wanta eat?" he calls towards the hole of Allen and Whittaker, the only two members of the Squad who haven't clustered around the fire.

"N-no thanks."

"Them two's takin' th' war awful serious," remarks O'Connors, as he gulps his coffee. "They ain't bin outa the'r holes to take th' air all day. All they do's dig . . . Say, you guys, you tryin' to git to China?"

But Anderson takes the remnants of a tin of coffee over to the two:

"Yuh-all'd bettah drink this. Neveh know when yuh'll get anotheh. May move out'n here, yuh know, up fo'a'd. We ain't nowheah neah th' Front yet."

"Aw, you must be kidding," one of them says. "Not near the Front yet, an' with all that shelling this morning!"

By the scant daylight, the infantry digs deeper under the surface of the ground, farther into the side of the hill. For, from over the top of it, that screaming shell came. After dark, they crawl into their holes and wrap themselves up.

"Saiy, Jim," Anderson turns towards Marzulak, on his left. "Ah didn't leave enough leeway fo' mah laigs. They've gotta hang out'n th' open."

"Dat's de trouble wid bein' so long, Shorty, you gotta handle more dirt dan de rest of us."

"Ah reckon they won't get in no shell's waiy. They may be long, but at thet, they don' take up much space in this whole woods."

"Sure, dey'll keep 'til mornin'. It's quiet enough

here now, anyhow. But can you beat dis war? Not a Heinie sighted yet."

"Gawd, Jim, youah anxious. Th' wa's movin' fas' enough fo' me. Ah cain bide mah time fo' Ah sees a Fritz. Reckon that'll come soon enough."

For a while, cigarette embers glow out of the holes. One by one, they flick out.

Sometime during the night the cry—GAS!—leaps from mouth to mouth through the woods. The soldiers fumble into masks, and begin to fall off to sleep, breathing noisily and drooling through the rubber mouth-pieces, until some one gives the—All Clear!—signal.

Later, during the night, they are startled awake by the sirenic scream and simultaneous burst of a shell. Then that significant pause, while Gray listens. He knows the burst was close, for earth falls about him and smoke drifts across his face as he raises himself up and peers into the darkness.

"Help—oh—help—take me out—oh, Gawd—take me out o' heah!"

"Who's that?" Gray asks, as he quits his hole.

"Me, Corp'ril, Anderson—it's got me bad—oh, Jesus Christ—oh, Gawd!"

Through the woods, shells shriek and burst, burst and shriek. Earth sprays through the trees and fragments of flying steel whine and drone through

the air and smack against the ground. Twice Gray flattens himself as he makes his way towards Anderson's hole, only a few yards distant from his own.

"Where'd you get it, Shorty?"

"All oveh—oh, Christ—oh, Gawd—Ah'm done fo'!"

"Come on, Squad, four of you to carry Anderson to the Dressing Station!"

The detonations throughout the woods muffle his voice. No one appears out of his hole. Anderson moans and screams. Gray, frantic, leans over and pokes Marzulak:

"For God's sake, Jim, come on, we've got to do something!"

The Serb comes out. After him O'Connors and Waglith.

"All right, there're four of us now. No litters. Gimme your shelter-half, Jim!"

They slip the canvas under Anderson, who complains every moment of the pain, take a corner each and set out along the trail. As they go, they ask their way.

"Along the trail, until the first turn to the left. Then straight up the hill. There's a sign there with a Red Cross on it."

"Tough luck, buddy," comes another voice out of the darkness.

"Oh, Christ—mah laigs—how they hurt!"

The wounded man raves deliriously:

"Oh, Christ—thet hoss mus' 'a' fell on me—oh, Andy—pull 'im off—but easy—easy—it hurts—he's on mah laigs—he's hurtin' 'em—he's breakin' 'em—oh, Gawd—oh, Gawd—oh, Gawd!"

Then he breaks back into the present:

"Did Jim get it too—or them boys?"

"No, Shorty, I'm here beside you an' de boys're all right."

"Oh, motheh—oh, motheh—oh, motheh!"

He moans in a rhythmic way, commencing low down on the scale and mounting, mounting, mounting, until his voice is a scream.

Rain patters down as the group pushes painfully through the woods. It loses the trail and plunges into the wet bushes, twisting and dragging the wounded man until he faints.

"That's better," says Gray. "He was making so much noise I's afraid the Boche might hear us—for maybe the lines aren't so far off."

The quietness of Anderson relieves the tension.

"Where's he hit, Corp?" asks O'Connors.

"Got it across the legs, seems like. His left knee here's all messed up an' there's some jagged H.E. stuck in the heel of his shoe. Dam' stuff's been burning an' cutting into my hands where I'm holding him."

"But that ain't all of it, Corp," Waglith puts in. "His left hand here's all gooey."

"Yeah, it got him bad."

"Funny thing, Corp," says O'Connors, as he looks across Anderson's shattered body at Gray. "When I first heard yer voice callin' back there, I couldn't git outa my hole. I knew I oughta, but I felt paralyzed."

"Me, too," says Marzulak.

"Jesus, I couldn't even think," Waglith adds.

Ahead, they see a 75 mm. gun, in position under its camouflage. Behind it is the dark entrance to the crew's dugout. Gray shouts down:

"Is there a Dressing Station 'round here? We've got a badly wounded man with us."

A voice grumbles below. A soldier pokes his head up and emerges. On his arm is a Red Cross brassard.

"This th' Dressin' Station?" asks Gray.

"No—where's your man?"

He looks at Anderson, quiet, eyes closed over his white face, and breathing raucously. He places his hand gently over Anderson's abdomen. He takes it away and sees it covered with blood.

"Nothin' to do for that. He's done for."

Gray's eyes, guided by the movement of the other's hand, rest on Anderson's abdomen. Blouse and breeches are distended and bloody.

"Oh, God," he ejaculates. "He's split wide open. Guess he never knew it himself."

"But there's a Battalion Dressin' Station just over there," the Red Cross man is saying. "Follow that path, there. It's only twenty yards down it. A big dugout."

The four Squad mates reach the dugout with the disheveled bundle. As their feet scrape against the logs corduroyed over its sloping entrance, from below the curtain that blocks the way, a voice shouts out:

"Don't bring any one down here if there's gas on him!"

A hand pulls aside the gas curtain and a face appears:

"If there's any gas on that man, you've gotta strip him before you bring him in here."

"No—no gas," Gray answers. "It's a shell wound."

"All right. Come on."

They lay Anderson gently over an open space on the earthen floor of the dugout. The underground chamber is timbered heavily overhead and lighted by candles melted on wooden boxes. The air is smoky and foul with the odors of sweat and antiseptics. One of the Medical Officers, moving about among the litters lined against the walls, comes to Anderson and leans over him. The wounded man opens his eyes:

"Wateh—motheh—wateh—Ah'm suffocatin'—Ah cain't breathe—Ah'm dyin' Ah reckon—Ah'm dyin' shuah . . ."

Already the pallor of death is over his face. His features stiffen. His lungs are soaked. He drowns in his own blood.

II

A CAST-OFF rifle, driven into the ground by its bayonet, marks a freshly turned-up mound of earth close by the entrance to the Battalion Dressing Station. Over the butt end of the rifle sags a helmet that swings to and fro in the wind, with a slight rasp.

Six soldiers and a Corporal of the Last Squad see it just before daybreak, as the column winds up the wooded slope. They all know whose grave it is, but no one points it out. For they don't talk as they file through the woods, foul with the odors of decayed flesh, fumes of gas and burnt powder, and oppressive with a constant threat of death.

When the column reaches the top of the hill and debouches into the open, a tremor passes down through the files. Out here it is lighter, brighter. A fresh wind blows, and those odors are gone. The soldiers feel easier—as if a tight clamp had been taken away from the skin over the forehead. They voice thoughts again . . .

"What do you think, Hugh?" asks Allen. "Are we going up or back?"

"Got me, Allen, but I'm ready to go back."

"Pore Shorty," says O'Connors. "He didn't git very far."

"Ain't dat hell," remarks the Serb. "To get knocked off dat way widout ever gedding a wallop at de Heinies. I never knowed a fellow could get blowed off like dat nowhere near de enemy."

"He was so big," Waglith joins in. "That shell couldn't miss him. Watch out, Mike, you're not so long, but you're bigger 'round."

"Don'tcha fret, Mose, they ain't gonna git *me*."

"Maybe none of us've gotten very far yet," says Whittaker. "But I feel like we'd seen enough of this war already, even if we don't see any more, to talk about for a year when we get home."

"Hell, what'd you an' that buddy o' yours see? You rah-rah boys never come outa yer holes 'til th' Sarge dragged you out 'n hour ago"—and O'Connors turns 'round—"Ain't that so, Sergeant? . . . an' look at Allen. He's tremblin' yet!"

"Some guys didn't seem to enjoy theirselves back there," says Jackson, swinging along at the tail of the Platoon file.

Allen trembles and shudders at his recollection of the sound of the shells and of Anderson's agonized cries. The shell that killed Anderson exploded so close to his and Whittaker's hole it covered their feet with earth. All the rest of the night he lay awake. He couldn't sleep under the threat of another shell

that might siren into his hole. The suspense seemed too awful to bear. He wanted to sleep, but he couldn't. His fear wouldn't let him. He wanted to forget, but he couldn't. He shivered with cold and fatigue and terror. His mind was filled with the incomprehensible horror of human beings—like him—killing each other with those ghastly, shrieking shells. It was inhuman, intolerable. He hadn't known war was like that.

So he shivers and trembles now, and prays silently as he marches along with the column. He begs God that they may go to the rear, away from the sound of shells, away from the possibility of the sound of shells, where he can rest, sleep, forget and maybe get a new grip on himself.

"Fall out on the right of the road!" and the column flops.

As he leans against his pack, at daybreak now, Allen's eyes rest on the front of his blouse and breeches.

"Oh, God!" he stutters aloud.

Spattered over him is blood. For a moment he thinks it is out of his own body. Then he realizes that it's the blood of Anderson, lying in the earth back there in the woods. Furtively, he leans down, scoops a handful of dust off the road and sifts it across himself.

"What's th' trouble, Allen, you soiled yer purty clo'es?" asks O'Connors, tauntingly.

"Psst, Mike, lay off," warns Gray.

"He's gotta git used to it, Corp. Th' war's just started fer us."

"Give him time, an' maybe he will."

"Forr-warrd!"

Erratically, the soldiers climb to their feet and get under way.

Full daylight comes as the column files along a white road that winds off towards the northeast.

It is sultry, with the sun shining through a haze after the rain of last night. The country alongside the road is deserted and utterly devastated. Wide, low bands of barbed wire zigzag across the fields, pocked with the scars of shells, with fox-holes and shallow trenches. An ominous quiet shrouds the valley. Everywhere are the scars of war, but nowhere a sign of life, only desertion and devastation.

"God, ain't it a funny war," says Marzulak. "I can't get it. De farder we hike and de nearer we get, de less we see. Where in hell're de Heinies? I seen more workin' on roads up where we were in billets dan here."

"It's tough luck 'bout you, Jim," O'Connors answers him. "You bin sold, that's all there is to it. You better write Washin'ton an' complain. Tell th' Guv'ment you bin put in th' Army, stuck up

front, an' never wuz given a Jerry to take a swipe at. Write th' noospapers. Th' folks back home oughta know how bad you bin treated."

"Dat's a'right. I didn't join de Army fight wid my feet, but wid my rifle and dis blade," and he taps the piece slung over his shoulder.

"But it is queer," says Waglith. "It ain't like the pictures of war, or the stories. In them it's all men and horses, blood and thunder—but here it's all space, silence and once in a while a shell."

"Why don't they tell us something about what's going on?" says Gray. "We don't know where the Germans are, or whether we're going forward, or back, or sideways?"

"A soldier ain't supposed to know nothin'," O'Connors puts in. "He ain't even supposed to think."

A shell drones high overhead and sprays up its crude fountain of black smoke and particles of earth a mile away from the troops. For a long while, as the column marches on, the soldiers watch the cursory fire.

"Must be trying to cut communications," remarks the Lieutenant, marching beside the Last Squad. "For every shell seems to burst along that railway line over there. A sacrifice battery, I guess. They're liable to lose those guns."

Suddenly, a shell falls short. The soldiers can tell by its sound in the air that its range is different from

the others. They duck. The burst sounds some distance ahead of the Last Squad. The column drags slowly to a halt and the cry—First Aid Men!—comes along. Four stretcher bearers hurry forward with an empty litter. They come back slowly, the handles of the heavy litter supported on their shoulders. The onward march is resumed and the column passes a bowl-like cavity in the macadam of the road. It smokes.

The column is long. A single soldier moving along as part of it is aware only of his platoon, his company, perhaps his battalion. Likely enough there is a regiment, a brigade, a division, stretched out along the road, miles and miles of snake-like column of olive-drab. The shelling is cursory. Its toll is light. Yet it worries Allen. While it was quiet, he was better. He trembled less. But now, every time a shell drones overhead, no matter how far away it explodes, he shudders.

Ahead, where the white road seems to end, appears a sizable town, basking in the sunshine of the summer afternoon. As the column enters, Waglith reads the customary blue sign fixed on a house-front: Château Thierry.

"Say, I read about this place in a noospaper," he exclaims. "Chatoo Terry! There was some fightink around here!"

"Looks dead enough now," says Marzulak.

Through the town, its houses gaping vacantly with paneless windows, its streets cluttered with tangled telephone wires, the troops go slowly. Along the edge of a river, the column halts.

"That must be the Marne," says Waglith, in the rôle of tour conductor. The only other feature of France any one in the Last Squad has identified up until now was Paris.

"You seem to know everything, Mose," says Marzulak. "Tell me where de Heinies are. Dis emptiness is beginnin' to get on my nerves."

"We're looking for 'em, I guess. Don't worry."

The soldiers fall out and watch a detail of engineers throw across a pontoon bridge beside the massive steel and stone structure, blown-up and dangling in the water. On the farther bank is a gay group of Frenchmen. One plays a mouth-organ, one capers drunkenly, and another brandishes a bottle.

"How'd they get there?" asks Whittaker.

"Dunno, but one's sure got a jag on."

"So'd I," says O'Connors, "if I wuz turned loose here. I'll bet there's plenty o' likker down in them cellars."

The chain of pontoons swings across with the current. An engineer jumps onto the farther bank. He lashes a rope around a stone post and the bridge is ready for the infantry. The column goes across, steel hobs striking heavily on the planks laid across

the hollow boats. As the Last Squad passes by the group of Frenchmen, some one sings out:

"Hello, Frogs, how's th' war?"

"*Venez—buvez,*" one answers and gesticulates with the bottle.

O'Connors looks furtively at the Lieutenant's back, darts out from the column, grabs the bottle and tips it into his mouth.

"*A la votre—vive les Américains!*"

"Hey, you, from the Last Squad!" shouts the Lieutenant. "Get back in column!"

"Yessir, yessir," says O'Connors, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "Christ, that wuz good," he adds, in a lower voice.

The column climbs up from the edge of the river. A shell hurtles through the air, screaming close overhead. It crashes on the bank, not far from the end of the pontoons. The soldiers duck, then look back over shoulders. The burst made a kind of dent in the column, where it bellied as the soldiers, quitting the pontoons, threw themselves on the ground, away from the explosion. They pick themselves up now, but the Frenchmen are gone—wiped out. No single trace of them remains—only a great bowl in the earth, smoking where they stood.

"Oh, Jesus!" ejaculates O'Connors. If I'd taken that swig three minutes later—oh, God!"

Allen pales and trembles.

The column climbs up over the eminence above the river and winds away from the town.

"Say, dere's a different feel here?" says Marzulak. "Notice it, Mike?"

"Yeah, does seem diff'rent. What th' hell is it?"

Waglith stares at an enormous dump of shells along the road, each shell in an individual wicker basket.

"Say, they ain't Allied shells," he exclaims. "They must be Cherman shells. What the hell! Say, d'you think we're behind the Chermans?"

As if in answer to the query, the Lieutenant comes along the Platoon file, cups his hands about his mouth and shouts:

"Don't touch anything! The territory we're now goin' through has been occupied for months by the enemy an' was evacuated only last night! Look out for explosive traps! Particularly when you go into any dugouts!"

They look about curiously. Around the fox-holes and shallow trenches—recent homes of the enemy infantry—is scattered a new kind of equipment—hostile, strange and awesome. Awkward, blunt helmets; round, pancake caps encircled with a band of scarlet; rifles with thick, heavy bayonets; gas masks in tin cans and long, tangled snakes of machine-gun belts.

"Jees, that's funny looking equipment!"

"An' them's ugly bay'nits!"

"An' ther' enough machine-gun bullets in them belts to kill a regiment!"

As he sees along the road more piles of neatly basketed shells, Waglith exclaims in wonderment:

"Look at the way they do up their shells! That's 'Made in Chermany' for you!"

Allen shudders and looks at the Corporal.

"We're gettin' dere, Mike," says Marzulak.

At every cross-roads are huge heaps of *chevaux-de-frises*, long saw-horses entwined with barbed wire and jumbled across the way as obstructions. The column slows down while details cut the wire, smash the frames with rifle butts and toss them aside into the fields. The column approaches a razed village, marked with a huge sign in black letters: Bezuet. A barricade of stones, bricks and chunks of plaster from demolished houses lies across the road. The column swerves around it. On that side sits a heavy, Maxim machine-gun, its muzzle pointing through a loop-hole and trained along the road. Beside the squat gun lies its gunner, a gray soldier with his bare head bashed. Gray brains and dried blood are clotted between him and the macadam of the road.

"There's yer first Jerry, Jim," says O'Connors.

"And he'll never hurt you," adds Waglith.

Marzulak doesn't answer as the column debouches off the road, and crosses some tilled fields towards a

patch of woods. Here it halts on orders to dig in along the edge of the timber.

"Ain't it hell to hafta dig a hole before you c'n go to bed—after hikin' all day," says O'Connors, as he chucks off his pack, kneels and sets to work with his short entrenching spade.

The sun sinks as the soldiers dig themselves under the surface of the ground. Only Allen wanders about aimlessly. O'Connors sees him, once, as he pauses and straightens up from his work.

"Why ain't you workin', Allen?" he asks. "That ain't th' way you behaved up there in th' woods. You dug down deep enough there. What's th' trouble?"

Allen mumbles a reply that no one understands.

"Lookit th' Corp. He's an example o' industry," O'Connors goes on. "He's dug his eighteen inches down an' now he's goin' to have a bath."

Gray has taken off shoes and socks and sits on the ground, washing his feet in his tin cup.

"Had to do it, Mike. My socks, shoes an' feet felt they'd all grown together."

"Guess yer safe enough, Corp. Th' germs'll all be dead before you get any coffee to put in that tin cup."

Allen wanders aimlessly in Gray's vicinity.

"What's up, Allen?"

"Like a word with you when you're through there."

Gray puts on a clean pair of socks he takes out of his haversack, replaces his shoes for the night and takes Allen apart, out from the edge of the woods.

"What is it?" he asks, reassuringly. "Havin' a hard time?"

"Yes, I am, a bad time. I don't think I can stand it any longer. Couldn't I go to the rear, somehow?"

Allen is pale and trembles constantly. Every time a shell drones overhead and bursts, away off, he jumps and shudders.

"Let's sit down here, on this log," and Gray indicates an oblong, dark splotch on the ground near by.

"Wup!" he cries out suddenly and fends Allen roughly away. Closer, Gray sees that the log is a dead German.

"God, it's things like that get me." Allen, too, has seen. "I can't stand it. I've gone nervous all over. It's terrible. If I could only go back to the town and sleep in a cellar, I think I'd be better. I'm not yellow. It's not that. It's just that my nerves've gone bad."

"Yes, I know. We'll go over an' see the Lieutenant about it."

"Lieutenant," Gray interrupts the Platoon Commander, who digs a hole beside Sergeant Jackson. "Allen's nerves've gone back on him. The shell that killed Anderson burst by his feet and he hasn't been right since. He's no good to the Squad any longer. Mightn't he just as well go back?"

"Leave him here, Corporal. I'll see about it."

The Lieutenant takes Allen over to the Medical Officer, who leans over a soldier, bandaging a wounded arm in the twilight.

"Hell, no," the Medical Officer answers the Lieutenant's query testily, as he looks up. "I can't blue tag every fellow who's got the jumps. I've got 'em myself. We'd all have to go to the rear."

The two return to Gray.

"Sorry, Corporal, the Medical Officer won't tag him," and the Lieutenant turns towards Allen. "Stick close to the Corporal for the night. He'll take care of you."

Gray walks Allen up and down the edge of the woods. He puts his arm around Allen's trembling back, grips his biceps, holds him close against his own body. So he succeeds in stilling the shuddering until another shell drones and crashes, dully, in the distance. Then the trembling recommences and Allen sobs:

"I can't stand it, see, I can't stand it any longer. I can't go on. Please send me to the rear. I'll be all right if I can get away from the sound of them for a few days. I can't help myself. It's just gotten me."

"I know, Allen, it's that close burst in the woods that did it. That's all right. I understand. But the hell of it is, I can't do anything about it. I can't send you to the rear." Gray pauses and adds:

"But you can go back if you want. I don't care, and I won't say anything."

"No, I'm afraid. I might be picked up as a deserter and shot."

They pace up and down in the dark. Allen's nerves quiet down.

"Come on now, we'll turn in. You haven't any hole, have you?"

"No, I hoped I'd go back, so I didn't dig one."

"Well, we'll bunk in my hole. It'll be a tight fit for the two of us, so tight you'll be under me, where no shell can reach you unless it bumps me off first. An' I'm not looking for that to-night. Come on, now, everything's going to be quiet 'til morning."

The others are already asleep. The woods is quiet but for an incessant coughing and spitting that comes out of a truck which looms up darkly near by.

"What's that?" asks Allen, as the two crawl into the shallow hole Gray has dug.

"Gas cases from the woods we came out of this morning," Gray answers.

"God, isn't it hell!" says Allen. "It's too awful to be real. It's like a bad dream."

2

By night, a mumbled order is carried through the troop-infested woods.

"Full pack—column o' twos—out on th' road!"

The soldiers grumble and swear as they rise up sleepily out of their holes.

"Ain't we never gonna git a night's sleep outa this dam' war?"

"A guy can't go on ferever."

"No eats—no sleep, but when we get there they'll expect us to fight, all right."

"A full-sized man c'd knock me over wid a cough."

"More foot work, oh Lord!"

Amid the mutters, figures rustle and show up indistinctly along the edge of the woods. It seems to be crawling with life.

"Come on, Allen, I guess we're going to the rear," Gray lies. "Stick to me."

They light cigarettes, carefully hiding the flame of the match under helmets. They smoke in lieu of breakfast. The deep inhalations seem to take away the vacantness of an empty belly. With the embers shielded in the palms of hands, the column moves out across the field and onto the road, white against the darkness.

Dawn comes somberly. Rain patters down on steel helmets and on shoulders, drips off the skirts of slickers and soaks through the knees of breeches until the soldiers can feel it coursing down legs.

"God, this is awful," says Allen.

"Yer dam' right it's awful," says O'Connors re-

sentfully. "You never had nothin' like this in yer life, didya?"

"Hello, what's this coming down the road?" Gray exclaims.

A column slices by. The infantry is hollow-eyed, unshaven, unkempt, caked with mud. The artillery and wagon trains drop dead horses along the way like milestones.

"What outfit, buddy?"

"1001st. Who th' hell're you?"

"1011th. Where you goin'?"

"Goin' back, praise Jesus. Bin up here a month an' a half. Ain't that long enough?"

"Where's de Front?" asks Marzulak.

"Up there. You're headin' right."

"What's it like up dere?"

"What's it like? Ask yer great grandmother what it wuz like to have her eighteenth baby!"

Gray looks at Allen, walking beside him. But he seems oblivious of the significance of the banter between the columns. Allen walks quietly, head bent down. He doesn't tremble. There are no shells now.

A halt, while the cookers rattle up from rear, pull off into a field and kindle fires. The soldiers flop into the ditch along the road, tip helmets over faces against the rain and doze, while the fragrance of coffee tangs the wet air. . . . They awake at the Mess Sergeant's cry:

"Come an' get it!"

Each of the four platoons of M Company forms its chow line by the cooker. They march by in the rain and get a mess cup full of coffee, a chunk of bread and a tablespoonful of molasses on the mess pan lid.

"Say, Mike," Gray calls, "think those germs're gone by now?"

"Sure thing, Corp, fill up yer bathtub."

"Don't bunch up," the Platoon Commanders warn. "We may be under shell-fire any minute. Keep that distance between men."

"Aw, hell," Whittaker grumbles in an undertone. "I'd rather be warm and get some chow. Guess a shell's as likely to get you wherever you are."

The moment the officers' backs are turned, the files bunch up close to the warm cookers and cans of steaming, fragrant coffee. They eat standing up, scrape out mess kits with wet grass and stow them in packs. A command comes along the ditch:

"Forr-warrd!"

The sun comes out. Slickers are shed and tucked in under cartridge belts. The wet, woolen breeches steam and dry. It warms and the pace drags. Another halt and the column flops on the side of the road. A troop of French horse, armed with long lances, trots by, leaves the road and files off to skirt the northeast edge of a woods ahead.

"Gee, aren't they funny looking," says Waglith. "With those old-fashioned spears."

"Guess they can stick a Dutchman with them as well as anything else," says Gray.

A battery of French 75's rattles up from rear, goes off along a wagon-trail, halts and begins to unlimber.

"Looks like there wuz somepin gonna happen 'round here soon," comments O'Connors. "Better warm up, Jim."

The Captain comes along the road.

"Osgood," he addresses the Fourth Platoon Commander. "Take your platoon up ahead, throw out two squads on either side as flankers and one ahead as point. We're leading the Regiment to-day. Go forward slowly until you're recalled—or run into machine-gun fire."

"Follow me," says the Lieutenant, in turn, to the Platoon. When well ahead of the main column, he halts and disposes of his squads, one by one.

". . . and sixth and seventh squads as flankers on the right, a good hundred yards off the road."

Gray leads his six men across a field up to the edge of a woods.

"Load and lock your pieces," he says.

He watches the Lieutenant, back on the road. At a signal from the officer, he starts the Squad off. It files along the edge of the woods until it comes to a

corner, from where the trees extend down to the road. Here, in line of skirmishers, it plunges into the thickness. Dry twigs crackle underfoot. With rifles at the ready, the soldiers step slowly, carefully, and stop often to listen. There is only silence throughout the woods. Nowhere is there any sign of life. From time to time they come upon former enemy encampments—fox-holes and dugouts —littered with hostile equipment. They look for faces in the black mouths of dugouts, but there is only desertion. Gray puts his hand in the ashes of a dead fire.

"They're still warm, Jim," he says. "They haven't been gone out of here so very long. That's sure."

"Dat's good. Let's push on."

Fixed in the crotches of trees are platforms—former observation posts or machine-gun nests. Once, Marzulak quickly throws his rifle to his shoulder. A gray figure leans against the base of a tree. He laughs as he lowers his piece. Beside the riddled cadaver is a great shell-hole.

"Jees, he got his."

Allen looks at Gray.

"I can't stand it, Corporal. How long've we got to go on like this?" He is pale and trembles again.

"Hell, there's nothing here. Stick close to me."

Everywhere is silence, desertion, death. Nowhere a sign of life. From nowhere the crack of a rifle

or burst of machine-gun fire. Suddenly, through the woods ahead, a shell shrieks towards the Squad. The soldiers duck as a hollow—plummp—sounds close in front.

"That sounds like a gas shell!" Gray calls out loud. "GAS!" he shouts, as his nose twitches with the fumes. He snatches his mask out of the satchel over his chest and fixes it over his face.

They stand still for a minute, while they pick up helmets, which fell backwards and thudded against the ground as they donned masks. Smoke seeps about them as they go forward, swinging heads slightly from side to side, the better to see through the clouded eye-pieces. They appear like upright, snout-faced pigs, scrubbing in a woods.

Through the haze, Gray hears Allen's muffled voice:

"I can't breathe—there's something wrong with my mask—what'll I do?" And the voice trails off into a whine.

"Hell, what can I do?" Gray mumbles in answer. As he moves forward, through the haze, he sees Allen's form, motionless, drift rearwards.

The smoke clears. Gray edges a forefinger under his mask and sniffs. He tears it off and shouts:

"All Clear!"

He looks around for Allen but hears only the

rustle of underbrush and crackling of twigs. The sound fades steadily, and dies away.

"He's all right. If he can move like that, guess he didn't get gassed."

"It's a good thing th' kid's gone. He wuzn't fit fer war," says O'Connors.

They go on forward, scattered a bit through the woods. Alertly, they peer among the trees.

"God, it's queer, Mike," says Marzulak. "Dere ain't any one to fight."

III

A COMPANY runner fumbles down along the line of abandoned, Boche dugouts, covered over with slabs of corrugated sheet-iron, sticks, stones and earth.

"Where th' hell's Lieutenant Osgood?" he mutters into the mouths of various holes.

"Five down," some one answers out of the earth. "What's on? Jesus, we ain't goin' up, are we?"

"Goin' somewhere, fer it's full pack," the runner replies.

Opposite the fifth hole down, he repeats his message formally: "Lootenant, orders are roll full packs an' be ready to move out in ten minutes."

"All right," the Lieutenant mumbles out of his hole. Then louder: "Jackson, hey, Jackson, wake up. Goin' to move. J-a-c-k-s-o-n, come to. . . . You awake? All right. Notify the corporals to get the men up, roll full packs an' be ready to clear out in ten minutes."

Jackson's bulk moves about in the darkness.

"Hey, you squad leaders, bust out—rouse 'em up —we're gonna move out!"

Gray comes awake with the sensation that he's just fallen off to sleep. He lights a cigarette and

looks at his watch by its ember. Eleven o'clock. He turned in at nine. He crawls out of his hole, fully dressed and shod, rubs his eyes and shivers in the cool night air. He goes down along the line of his Squad, thrusts his arm through the mouths of the holes and pokes whatever portion of a body presents itself.

"Full packs an' be ready to move in ten minutes," he says.

He sets to work on his pack, while his Squad mates crawl out of holes, dragging blankets and equipment behind them. They grumble, but roll packs quickly. Bodies bend obediently to months of discipline, while minds stay virtually asleep. They put on slickers for the sake of warmth, grunt into packs, lean dejectedly, sleepily, on rifles and shiver with chill. The Lieutenant comes along:

"Follow me," and the Platoon straggles behind him through the woods and out onto a road.

Again the soldiers stand and shiver, until the Captain comes by:

"Osgood, fall in at the tail of the Third Platoon —double column o' files—one on each side of the road."

The soldiers sling rifles over shoulders. They are heavy and quiet with sleep, and hunched forward under the hump of their packs. Silently, they shuffle

forward until the units drag out into two long thin columns. The road goes on ahead, a straight, white band which cuts across flat, open country that stretches away desolately into the darkness. The quiet is broken by the Lieutenant's voice:

"Don't bunch up—keep that five-pace distance!"

"It's hell how they always bunch up at night," he says to the Captain. The two officers walk together in the middle of the road, between the two single columns.

"At the start they bunch and at the end they straggle—poor devils!" the Captain says, and the two officers join in the silence of the columns.

It is quiet and still. No trucks lumber up past the infantry to-night. No traffic moves along the road. No sounds, no sights.

The road dips into a wooded hollow and mounts abruptly.

"Hell . . ." Some one begins to speak and breaks off.

A flare goes up and bursts like a skyrocket. It drifts slowly downward and casts a pale, flickering light across the tree tops. A machine-gun, far away, goes rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . .

"God! There it is! There's the Front!"

Tensely, they watch for another flare, another burst of machine-gun fire. Again, a star-shell mounts, bursts and flickers down. Again a machine-

gun rivets out sightless death in the dark. Again it is quiet.

"God, ain't that queer!" says Waglith. "Just that, and nothink else."

"That's what that corporal from the 1001st told us!" Gray exclaims excitedly. "Remember, that fellow we met on the road yesterday, who'd lost his squad? That's just how he described it. Quiet—nothing moving about. Remember, he said a fellow who'd once been up claimed he could 'smell' the Front!"

"Dam' if I ain't glad," says Marzulak. "I'd rudder get killed dan live to hike ferever, only I'm gonna get one first."

"Awright, Jim, you'll git one before sunset—er one'll git you," says O'Connors. "Either way, seems like, you'll be satisfied. Wit' me, that don't go. It's only gonna work one way."

"Must I always hafta remind you about your size, Mike?" Waglith speaks up. "Don't forget you're twice as big as me. Twice as many bullets can hit you. You hafn't gotta chance."

"Shut up, you Yiddish bum, you must wanta see me under th' sod!"

The tail of the Squad is silent. Novelli walks easily, steadily, with the butt of a dead cigarette between his lips. He never speaks. No one speaks to him or expects him to talk. Whittaker strag-

gles double his distance in rear. He, too, is silent.

Ahead appears a glare, which grows steadily brighter. As the columns round a bend in the road, a huge fire comes into view among the trees.

"What's that?" asks O'Connors.

"Ammunition dump," Waglith answers. "An' we gotta go right by it!"

The wooden boxes and burning powder sputter like firecrackers. As the columns go by they swerve away from the heat towards the bushes on the far edge of the road. While the soldiers are silhouetted against the light, overhead sounds a pss-pss-pass, a whit-whit-whit, like the whistle of wild ducks before dawn, while the birds are still invisible in the air. A light, featherish sound. From far away comes the rat-tat-tat of a machine-gun.

Marzulak cocks an eye into the darkness overhead.

"Get dat, Mike?" he asks.

"Sure I git it, you think I'm deaf," and O'Connors' voice ends in a growl.

"Say, is that the noise bullets make!" exclaims Waglith. "That gentle sound? War ain't what it's said to be. I'm gettink more convinced of that every day I live."

"Jesus, those things don't sound like they could hurt you," Whittaker calls up from his position at the rear of the Squad.

Beyond, the columns pass a company of machine-gunners with their Hotchkiss guns tripoded in an irregular, camouflaged line up the side of a hill.

"Go to it, doughboys," calls a voice out of the dark. "We'll give you a hell of a good barrage."

"Barrage, hell, listen to th' heavy artillery soundin' off! Why don't you guys join th' infantry an' see th' war?" O'Connors answers.

"They can talk," says Gray. "They're dug in for the night an' I'll bet their chow carts are handy. Hell, we move every night an' we've just about given up eating. I'd like to know when we're gonna stop?"

"At Berlin," says Waglith.

"Mose, you'll be lucky if you git five miles closer to Berlin than you are right now," O'Connors says, and a tense, alarmed cry puts a period to his sentence.

"GAS!"

The alarm leap-frogs along the road. Each man spits out the curt word before he throws his mask over his face. Hooded, the columns go on. The eye-pieces cloud with the humidity inside the masks, so that the soldiers stumble blindly through a glazed darkness.

"Why, whata yuh doughboys dressin' up fo'? Theah ain't any gas 'round heah," drawls a voice out of the night.

"All cleah!" it shouts loudly. Then tauntingly, as the infantry takes off masks:

"Yeah, join th' infantry an' see th' wa'. Ain't thet what yuh-all said when yuh passed me back on th' road a way? When th' infantry don't know th' diff'ence between gas an' a dead hoss. You guys must be just outa trainin' camp, puttin' on masks eve'y time th' wind blows."

"How th' hell can we know when some dam' fool up ahead shouts gas?" O'Connors demands.

"Wise up. Wait'll you smell it. You talk tough enough to stand a whiff o' two."

The columns go on, towards the flares and the tapping machine-guns.

A shell whines overhead and bursts far beyond the road.

"Uh-huh," says O'Connors. "What's that mean?"

Another shell shrieks at the columns and crashes close. Instinctively, without command, the columns flatten into the ditches. The soldiers hit the ground hard, with a jangle of equipment, as they dive for whatever cover offers. Steadily now, shells scream and burst. They seem to fall in an even line, up and down, in a field thirty yards beyond the road.

Wh-o-o-o-m pa-oww—wh-o-o-m pa-oww—wh-o-o-o-m pa-oww

Jagged pieces of metal casing sing through the air.

The soldiers lie belly down, unutterably grateful

now for the thickness of the pack and equipment on backs. They hump themselves under the packs. They adjust helmets to cover the nape of the neck. They lie taut, faces ground into the grit of the ground. Tensely, they listen for the coming screech. They jam bodies against the earth as the awful howl ends with a crash. A moment of relaxation, but only until they pick up the commencement of another wail. It grows into a roaring scream almost too fast for senses to follow its increase in volume. Nerves tighten. They grind themselves into the earth. A colossal crash and the let-up . . . and all over again, again and again and again, for a mental eternity of fifteen minutes of actual time.

Ended, and the columns are up and on.

"God, th' Heinies must be like cats—able to see in th' dark. That wuz accurate fire."

"No, but they know there's a road here. They've got the range of it an' they know dam' well, where there's a road, there'll be infantry on the move at night."

"If they'd cut their range down fifty yards we wouldn't all be going on now."

The columns come to a rough, timbered bridge across a shallow stream.

"Form single column," comes the Lieutenant's voice. "Column on the left of the road fall in behind that on the right."

The hobs and steel-rimmed heels of shoes strike the timbers with a ring. Out of holes, cut into the road-bank close by, voices curse:

"More goddam infantry! Fer Jesus' sake, can't you walk without makin' such a hell of a racket? You'll draw more shell-fire sure. That's awright for you guys. You're goin' on, but we gotta stay here."

The voice comes from a gang of engineers detailed to maintain the bridge. Every time it is blown away, they have to quit their holes, come out in the open and carpenter under shell-fire.

"Th' hell wit' yer bridge. We don't need it. We kin walk through yer two-by-four crick."

"Yeah, you doughboys can—but how about th' artillery an' th' ambulances? Ther' ain't nothin' up where you're goin' but Dutchmen. An' maybe some o' you babies's gonna git hurt up there an' wanta go to th' rear, lyin' purty in a ambulance. An' what then? Then you'll want this goddam bridge, huh?"

The column reaches the outskirts of a town, passes a few scattered houses and enters on a cobbled street. The tread of feet gives out a hollow, dead sound. Paneless, black windows gape out of empty, stone houses. The town is silent, vacant, lifeless. From one end of it, a glare goes up into the sky and casts the shadow of the column against the house-fronts.

Midway down the main street, the column halts

and the Fourth Platoon files through an archway into a courtyard.

"Down that cellar," says the Lieutenant, pointing. He speaks in a hoarse whisper, yet his voice sounds loud in the enclosed quiet.

"An', Sergeant Jackson," he adds, "have one man stand to out here."

"All right, Sir." Jackson looks towards the Platoon. He catches Marzulak's eye.

"Yeah, Sarge, lemme stay out?"

"All right. Wake Guilford, out of the sixth squad, in two hours."

The Platoon disappears down the cellar hatch. It leaves the courtyard bare and quiet. The Serb weaves around in the dark, then goes through the archway out to the street. He looks down it, where it is dark, and up, towards the glare. All ways, it is quiet. He holds his rifle at the ready.

"Aw, where are dey, anyhow?" he mutters to himself. "Dey c'n come on anytime."

He turns away with a shrug of his shoulders, and meanders back into the courtyard. He pauses, then goes through a door near the cellar hatch and reappears with a chair. He tips it against the wall of the house and sits down, rifle balanced across his knees. He takes out of one of his blouse pockets a cake of chocolate—a handout of a few days ago from a "Y" man along a road—unwraps it and slowly

munches it. He finishes each bit before he takes another, licking the remnants off his teeth and gums, clearing his mouth of the taste after each nibble.

"What a quiet," he says to himself. "Might be a million miles from de Front!"—he looks towards the black hole that descends into the cellar—"or comin' off de graveyard shift back at de mines . . . Dose guys back dere, hell, dey're gettin' more a week now dan I'm makin' in a mont'—an' not walkin' near so far fer it . . . An', hell, dey call dis war!"

He reaches for a cigarette, but changes his mind as he listens to the quiet, and draws a plug of tobacco out of his blouse pocket. He bites off a chew and looks about. Near by, forming a dark spot on the flagstones, lies a jagged piece of shell casing. From now on, regularly, sounds the splash of spit striking the metal.

Gradually, the reflection of the fire at the other end of the town fades. A streak of light appears across the house-tops. Stretching away from the courtyard, Marzulak sees a pleasant, green lawn, interlaced with gravel walks bordered with pieces of statuary. In the center, just discernible in the weak light, is a playing fountain.

"Gee, it's funny. A whole dam' town dat no one owns. Everyting here's mine fer de takin'."

As daylight mounts, a sudden, quick whip sounds against the tile of a house-roof.

"If dat ain't a bullet, I don't know my name!"

He's up, rifle at the ready, peering about.

"Hmmm," excitedly. "Dey ain't so far off at dat. Dawn's bringin' 'em to!"

2

Even the thick, vaulted roof of the cellar fails to muffle the din outside—the strident screams and bursts of shells, the impact of stone against stone and the reverberating rumble of falling masonry.

"They're hittin' back awright . . . sounds like some one wuz usin' a maul on th' town."

A rustle comes out of the dark, the flare of a match and O'Connors shows up, kneeling beside a chair as he lights the stub of a candle.

"Say, Corp, it's a good thing we got underground when th' gittin' wuz good."

He melts the candle stub on the arm of the chair and rises:

"Wonder if ther' c'd be any grub 'round here?" He fumbles about the dark corners of the cellar.

Gray goes over to the doorway and shouts up the stairs:

"Oh, Guilford, you all right up there?"

"Yeah," the reply comes back indistinctly. "I'm in th' shelter of the doorway. But it's somethin' terrible outside."

"Oh, boy, look at that!" O'Connors exclaims gleefully, as he pulls a bottle of wine out from under a pile of cast-off German clothes heaped on a board shelf.

Marzulak, prone on a mattress on the floor, rises up halfway and blinks:

"What's dat?"

"Vin, buckoo vin. Come on, Squad, let's hit it!"

He pours several long swallows down his own throat, passes the bottle on to Marzulak and he to Novelli, who squats on the floor, a cigarette between his lips, the butt of his rifle resting in the triangle formed by his crossed legs. Its fixed bayonet leans over his shoulder.

"Come on, Mose, what th' hell're you doin' over there?"

"I ain't got time to drink. I'm puttink a gas curtain over this door so you won't be disturbed at your pleasures." Waglith drapes his blanket across the entrance to the cellar.

"Yer a dam' fool, Mose. . . . Say, it's a good thing ther' ain't a case o' this stuff here er th' war'd be over fer me to-day."

A crash falls overhead. It snuffs the candle. The cellar trembles. Mortar falls out from between the bricks and smoke seeps through the cracks.

"Great God, that must 'a' bin a direct hit on th' house!"

"What th' . . . ?" exclaims Waglith, as some one clatters down the stairway and catapults himself through the gas curtain into the middle of the chamber.

"Orders are to take up position to meet a counter-attack!" a voice shouts out in the dark, breathlessly, fearfully.

Gray strikes a match, relights the candle and calls into the adjoining cellar:

"Lieutenant, here's a runner with orders!"

The Company Runner's helmet is awry. His eyes glisten in the candlelight. Steadier now, he takes off his helmet and wipes the sweat off his face with his sleeve.

"Holy, jumpin' Jesus, but it's awful out there. Better stick to th' rear o' th' houses. I'd never got here if I'd stepped out on th' street. Ther' shells an' bullets all over. My God, it's awful!"

The Lieutenant comes into the dugout through a communicating passageway. The rest of the Platoon is at his heels.

"Sir, orders are to take up position to meet a counter-attack!" says the Company Runner.

"Load and lock pieces—fix bayonets!" the Lieutenant turns towards the soldiers, jammed into the one chamber and with equipment already on backs. "An' follow me!"

At the head of the stairway, daylight is shut out

suddenly by a figure that jumps through the cellar hatch simultaneously with the burst of a shell in the courtyard outside.

"Who's that?" asks the Lieutenant tensely.

"It's Holloway. That you, Osgood? Listen, quick! Message's just come from Battalion sayin' th' Boche're oozin' into town across th' river—under cover o' this hellish barrage—we're goin' to meet the attack along th' line o' these houses—you're on th' extreme left flank o' th' Company sector—take up position on that corner where we came in to-day—at th' junction o' th' two streets—but for Christ's sake don't go out on th' main street—it's enfiladed—death out there—go through the rear of th' houses—along here! For Christ's sake, hold—you've got th' pivotal position . . . that's all—good luck—send a runner back when you're in position—I'll be here . . . now—get off!"

Out in the open, the town disintegrates. No longer does anything remain fixed. Explosions tear off corners of dwellings, open up roofs, burst out through the faces, tear away rafters and joists which crash entire houses. Everywhere are jets of black smoke, geysers of stone, plaster and white dust. The bursts come so close together they sound like one massive, uninterrupted roar. The volume of the detonations is so great that it obliterates the screams of shells passing through the air.

Across the courtyard and over a low, stone wall, over the roofs of outhouses, through disheveled kitchens and out through another courtyard, the soldiers stream. At the base of walls and other obstructions, they bunch. Across open spaces, they spread out. Sometimes they flatten themselves against the ground, dart under cover of a wall, dive into a ditch or around the door of a house. Stones, chunks of shell cases and bits of plaster fall about them. They go without thought, madly, in the Lieutenant's wake.

"Gray, take that gate!" he shouts and points. "An' barricade it! Williams and Ives—take your squads through that house and stand by th' front door an' windows! Jones and Catman, in th' barn there! McGuiness and Dennowitz, take cover in th' barn an' stand by to reënforce when I tell you! Jackson,—take th' two squads in th' house! Bamberger—th' squads in th' barn! I'll command here at th' gate!"

The Last Squad fills up the open gateway.

"Anything you can find!" shouts Gray.

They drag beds, mattresses, tables, chairs, bureaus, out of the adjoining houses; pile up boxes, timbers, stones and rubble. The mass of barricade grows quickly, until it reaches about the level of the eye. Loopholes are poked through, low down for the two

automatic rifles, while the ordinary riflemen rest their pieces overtop.

"It's good now!" shouts Gray. "We've got enfilading fire both ways along the main street and down that cross street towards the bridge! Eyes everywhere!"

"Look sharp everywhere!" cries the Lieutenant. "Th' minute th' shellin' lets up, they'll come! Look for 'em close behind th' barrage!"

The din is so great Gray has to go to each man and shout the Lieutenant's warning into every ear.

The roar goes on. Fountains of black smoke and particles of earth geyser into the air behind the tense line of soldiers. Across the street, white dust bursts out of the houses, with bits of plaster, timbers and tiles. At the barricade, the soldiers duck their helmets against the rubble that strikes about them. The white dust settles over their uniforms and packs.

Suddenly, the curtain of shell-fire lifts and numbed ears ring in the apparent silence. Gradually, that silence ceases as another sound impinges on ears, another uninterrupted score:

pss-pss-pss-pss-pss
dzing-dzing-dzing-dzing-dzing

That comes from close overhead, while from farther away sounds the incessant rat-tat-tat-tat-tat of innumerable machine-guns.

"Stand to, everywhere!" shouts the Lieutenant. "They'll be comin' now!"

Far overhead, airplanes circle against a clear sky, like vultures drawn to and poised above a place of death.

Artillery in rear of the infantry opens fire. The shells pass overhead with a siren of sound and burst in a broad line that climbs the face of a hill, across the bridge and river, a kilometer distant. The neat line of bursts rakes the hill, down and up, up and down.

"Ain't that purty! Now they're gettin' theirs!"

The supporting machine-guns tap into the orchestration of fire. The bullets drone overhead, indistinguishable from the enemy lead.

The Last Squad leans against its barricade. Whittaker, with a rifle, presses himself into the angle between the barricade and the house on its right. Below him, Marzulak lies on the ground, staring fixedly along the barrel of his Chauchat, trained down the cross street towards the bridge. Novelli crouches beside him, with extra pans of ammunition piled between him and the automatic rifle. O'Connors lies a yard to the left, another Chauchat pressed against his shoulder, and Waglith hugs his side with ammunition. Gray, rifleman, stands at the extreme left of the barricade.

The Lieutenant weaves restlessly behind the Squad. He bends low, opens and closes his hands nervously. He looks like a quarter-back behind a football line-up.

"Where are they? Where are they? Aren't they goin' to come?" he mutters aloud.

"Light me a cigarette, Mose," says O'Connors.

"That's right," Gray puts in quickly, glad of the distraction.

He reaches in his blouse pocket with his right hand and extracts a single, bent cigarette. He asks Waglith to light it for him. He never takes his eyes away from along his rifle barrel. With a deep inhalation, he draws the smoke down into his lungs.

"Maybe that'll be th' last smoke." His lips form the syllables, but he doesn't actually speak.

They seem surrounded, hemmed in by the riveting machine-guns. The bullets whisk overhead ceaselessly. Out forward, as far as they can see, there is no life. The main street, to the right and left, is bare. So is the cross street, down which they can see as far as the bridge, a hundred yards distant. Across the street, and stretching down towards the bridge, the broken houses seem vacant. Occasionally a rafter or a stone gives way and rubble slides.

"How're they likely to come?" asks Waglith.

"Don't know," replies Gray. "Up that cross street, I guess . . . but keep your eyes to the left,

too, down the main street. They'll come fast, I guess, and in a bunch."

"Look sharp! Look sharp!" the Lieutenant keeps saying.

"I'm doin' that, awright," Marzulak growls, without taking his eyes off his Chauchat barrel.

No one has seen anything, when suddenly a Potato Masher flips through the air and explodes just in front of the barricade. Down the cross street a gray arm withdraws into the window of one of the houses.

"Open fire—you Chauchats—into the windows of those houses!" screams the Lieutenant. "They're seeping through . . ."

His words are lost in the clack of Chauchats and the snap of rifles. Lead pours down the cross street and splashes against the house-fronts.

A momentary pause, while the Chauchat feeders slip fresh pans under the automatics and the riflemen open the bolts of their pieces and jam full clips into the breeches.

No sign of life appears out forward. Then, from the corner of the roof of a house diagonally across the street, another gray arm waves upward against the sky. Another clumsy Potato Masher hurtles, end over end, towards the barricade . . . over the barricade . . . at Gray.

He ducks, then straightens up as if he realizes a

mistake. He swings his rifle at the object and catches it full, as one would a baseball. It hurls the grenade to one side of the barricade, where it explodes harmlessly in the air.

"Good . . ." shouts the Lieutenant, but again his words are lost in the clatter of the Chauchats. He pulls a hand grenade off his belt, jerks the pin and lobs it up over the corner of the roof. It bursts full over the top, shedding its unseen bits of metal against the tiles and through the holes. A gray arm is flung out, over the edge of the roof. It jerks a bit, and then lies still.

While Novelli clips a fresh pan under the automatic, Marzulak twists 'round and winks at the Lieutenant.

Other gray arms are flung out of the windows, and the tiny, black bores of Maxims are poked out of the corners. Now there is a crisscross of fire between the houses along the one edge of the cross street and that particular corner of the town occupied by the Fourth Platoon.

The smoke soon renders everything blind fire. The windows are blotted out. But lower down, where the smoke has lifted, a German jumps through a doorway out into the street. He goes down immediately, pitching forward headlong and throwing his arms out wide before his body. For a few moments he twists about over the cobbles, then lies quiet.

"Come on, you reserve squads, man the barricade!" shouts the Lieutenant. "They're tryin' to rush it!"

Bent over, the two extra squads rush onto the barricade and double the fire that goes out from it.

The Lieutenant lies on the ground, behind the base of the barricade. From time to time he tosses bandoliers of cartridges and musette bags full of loaded Chauchat pans to the squads. Once he raises himself too high, as he chucks a heavy musette, and a burst of machine-gun fire catches him in the shoulder. The impact swings him around in a semi-circle.

"They've got me, Gray!" he yells. "You take command!"

He crawls into the shelter of the barn and lies there quietly, gritting his teeth, while blood soaks through the shoulder of his blouse. He extracts his First Aid kit from his belt, but can't open the tin with only one hand. He tries to tear it open with his teeth, but can't. He lies there and swears.

"Lieutenant's got it!" shouts Gray. "We've gotta hold now!"

"What's dat? Lootenant hit?" Marzulak asks Novelli, who nods his head. "De basdards!"

He draws the Chauchat out of its loophole and rises to his feet.

"Where you goin', for Christ's sake?" asks Gray.

"Too slow dat way," the Serb answers.

He puts the stock of the automatic against his shoulder, leans up over the edge of the barricade and sprays fire down the street, swinging the gun from side to side. His helmet topples off, bumps across the barricade and rolls over the cobbles. His black hair is tumbled over his head. His dark eyes blaze.

"Oh, you basdards—basdards—basdards!" he grits out. "I'll pay you fer it all—de hikin'—de night work an' de empty bellies."

He climbs onto the barricade and calls to Novelli for another pan of ammunition. He twists himself from side to side . . . until, all at once, he collapses. His body crumples, falls onto the parapet and somersaults out forward. The Chauchat clatters against the barricade, against the cobbles of the street.

It is suddenly quieter. The smoke commences to lift. No more gray arms are flung out of the windows. The tiny bores of the Maxims disappear inside the bullet-pocked faces of the houses.

"They're givin'! Keep up the fire!" Gray shouts. "By God, Jim did it! They must 'a' thought we were comin' over with th' bay'nit!"

Novelli, who no longer has an automatic to serve, straddles the barricade, leans down and takes Marzulak's body under the shoulders. He drags him over the parapet and lays him on the ground, at

the base of the barricade. There is a small hole in the center of his forehead. Out of it, bluish bubbles ooze and burst. His eyes are closed. He is silent, although his lips move, open and close, for a few moments.

"Gone—nothin' do," says Novelli, helplessly.

"All right, Novelli, then look to the Lieutenant, by the barn," says Gray.

Novelli disappears through the smoke.

"Stand to, everywhere! They may come on again!"

The smoke clears and all fire ceases. Out forward, there is no sign of life. The German who stepped out of the doorway lies across the pavement, his head in the gutter. Another leans out of a ground floor window, buckled over the sill. Up over the corner of the roof, that arm hangs. The blood from it has made a stain on the white face of the house, and another on the pavement below. Alertly, the Last Squad stands at its post.

"God, it's all over," says Gray.

Novelli comes up.

"I took Lieutenant to Captain—he says Sergeant Jackson command Platoon."

Jackson appears at the kitchen door of the adjoining house. He rests there, with his hands clutching the jambs on either side.

"Where's th' Lieutenant?" he asks.

"Wounded," Gray answers. "An' the Skipper says you're in charge of the Platoon."

"All right, what're the orders?" He turns 'round and shouts into the house: "Watkins, go back to Company Headquarters and ask Captain Holloway for the orders." He turns to Gray:

"Any casualties?"

"Marzulak's knocked off," and he points to the body, beside the barricade.

"Tough. I had two wounded, but no one killed. Wonder how the other squads made out? Purty hot there for a while, huh?"

"God, yes!" fervently.

Captain Holloway, face streaked with sweat and filth, comes along:

"You did good. We held all along the line." He looks appreciatively at the squads at the barricade.

"Many casualties?"

Gray points to Marzulak.

"No one else?"

"Don't know about Sergeant Bamberger, on the left," Jackson answers. "I'll send for him."

"Can't wait. We've got to go forward. The only way we can hold against another attack like that is to occupy the town up to the river. Take the platoon forward and occupy all houses down that street as

far as the bridge. Listen for my whistle. Don't go forward until you hear it. An' be careful. Don't let yourself get enfiladed on any of these streets."

He goes off as he came. Bamberger appears.

"How'd you make out, Bamby?" asks Jackson.

"Not so good." He shakes his head. "Two killed an' three wounded—all by one shell before we ever saw a German. Hear th' Lieutenant got it in th' shoulder?"

"Yeah, I'm in charge. Th' Skipper's just been here an' says we've gotta go forward as far as th' bridge down there—when his whistle blows. Send your wounded back to Company Headquarters. Leave th' dead where they lie—I guess."

The airplanes are gone out of the sky. No more shells scream through the air and burst. No more bullets whisk overhead, and the riveting of the machine-guns is gone. Quietness everywhere. The Platoon assembles at the barricade and tensely awaits the whistle.

It blows.

"All right," says Jackson. "Take it slow now. Take advantage of all th' cover you can get. Two at a time. Bamby, you lead off."

Cautiously, in the half-light, they go forward. They hold rifles at the ready, so that the bayonets stick out like feelers. Two at a time, with a long distance between each couple, they file along the

edge of the houses, and wind in and out of the doorways.

Twilight and darkness. Marzulak, the Serb—the Serbian son-of-a-bitch the others sometimes called him—lies alone beside the barricade. The bluish blood has clotted over his broad, low forehead.

IV

Flares go up—burst—and the pale light wavers across the helmets and shoulders of a column of infantry that files silently along a road.

As a machine-gun clatters—the sound coming loud and clear through the night air—a soldier looks back over his shoulder and his anxious face stands out white in the light of the star-shells.

The column passes over a rough, timbered bridge across a shallow stream, with empty holes cut into the road-bank close by.

"Wonder how many times it's been blown away since we went across it before," says Whittaker, as the hobs and steel-rimmed heels of shoes strike the timbers with a ring.

"Plenty of times, I guess," Waglith hazards.

"An' remember those engineers who bawled us out? As if they thought it wuz a treat fer us to go up into that dam' town. Wonder where they are now?" says O'Connors.

"Blown away, too, maybe," Gray puts in. "Everything seems a bit changed now."

The column, too, is changed. It is lean and invisible holes gape in its ranks. It is shorter, by every

other file, than the column that passed over the road three days ago. And the eyes of the files are bloodshot and faces lined with fatigue.

The flares fade and the tapping of machine-guns becomes fainter. Dawn comes. It shows the tattered shreds of camouflage strung overhead and laced along the sides of the road; huge heaps of ammunition, equipment and ration dumps, ditched trucks and abandoned artillery emplacements.

Away from the road, the war-stricken country stretches desolately. The fields are pocked with foxholes, shallow trenches and the scars of shell-fire; littered with discarded rifles, gas masks, helmets, clothing, mess kits, belts, bandoliers, musettes; and strewn with German dead, blackened and enormously bloated.

"Hey, Waglith," O'Connors calls. "I'd like t've seen you mix it up wit' one o' those Jerries wit' th' bay'nit. He'd've split you like a rabbit."

"The hell he would've. I'd've dodged."

"Hello, what's this?"

"Some guys goin' up to take the'r turn, I guess."

Another column of infantry approaches along the road. The two columns—the worn and the fresh—meet.

"You th' 528th?" *

* The Author is aware that no such divisional designation as this existed in the American Expeditionary Forces.

"Yeah, what's it to you?"

"Hear you got into some fightin' up ahead?"

"Yeah, you might call it that. Who th' hell're you?"

"589th."

"Where do you think yer goin'?"

"Dunno, goin' to war, I guess."

"Dam' right yer goin' to war, an' you kin tell th' world we're goin' to th' rear."

"Aw, we've had too much o' th' rear."

"You look it. You look too purty to be goin' up there. But you'll lose yer shine soon enough."

"You guys look dirty enough. When d'you take a bath last?"

"Two months ago, an' what th' hell's it to you?"

"Don't be touchy, soldier."

"How long you bin acrost?"

"Landed last month."

"How'd you leave Noo York?"

"Still there."

"What're they singin' back there now?"

"*Over There.*"

"What's that?"

"That's over here now."

"Aw, what're you talkin' about, anyhow?"

"What's it like up where you bin?"

"Like nothin' you never saw at home, boy."

"That so?"

"Yeah, an' don't ask foolish questions."

"Huh?"

"Be patient—yer goin' in th' right direction—you'll see."

And the columns—the fresh and the worn—slice by each other.

Then come the emplacements of the 75's, and some few kilometers behind, those of the 155's—short snouted howitzers and graceful long rifles. Beyond, the column of infantry runs into all the traffic of the war that has gone on ahead. A jumble of ambulances, artillery, couriers, motorcycles, staff cars and trucks jams the road.

"The war's still going on. No doubt about that," Gray remarks.

"Isn't it great to see all that stuff going up when you're going to the rear?" says Whittaker.

"Yeah, Whittaker, that may interest you," growls O'Connors. "But it's them trucks we wuz told wuz waitin' fer us that interests me. What th' hell good's a truck if it can't come an' git you? . . .That's allus th' way wit' th' infantry. It has to help out everything wit' its feet. If you take a train, you hafta walk half-way to where yer goin' after th' train stops. An' if it's trucks you gotta walk all th' way there before you board 'em."

"We walk up and we walk back," Waglith chimes in. "It's a hellofa life."

"Who cares about trucks," says Whittaker. "We're going the right way, even if it's on our own feet. We're going to rest, going to take a big, long rest!"

"Wimmin an' coinyak an' payday overdue," says O'Connors. "What a time I'm gonna have! Jesus, we ain't seen a skirt since we left that Chatoo near Parus. Th' sight'll make my head go 'round an' my . . . humpty-umpty-oo!"

"A barnful of hay'll seem like a swell hotel. Ain't it funny? It's all in th' point of view," says Waglith.

"An' three squares a day." Gray puts his hand over his belly.

Novelli grins at the others and his eyes sparkle. Unexpectedly, he speaks:

"Jim got his—now I no got automatic feed."

"Did you hear that, Squad!" Waglith exclaims. "Novelli said somethink!"

"Th' war's made th' Eyetalian speak. Them's th' first words I've heard outa you in two months, Novelli. By God, th' war has done somepin!"

Novelli spits out the butt of his cigarette and grins. But he's through talking.

"Yeah, Jim got his right enough, but I guess he didn't care, by th' way he talked. He got one first. That's all he wanted. Guess he's satisfied."

O'Connors mumbles along:

"It wuz a scrap, too, hot enough fer a while. But it didn't las' long an' what a hell of a lot o' hikin' we did fer it. Seems to me like we walked criss cross fer a month to git into that scrap. Why couldn't we a-walked straight up into that dam' town in th' first place, an' got it over wit', onct an' fer all?"

"But ain't it different from what we thought it was before we got into it?" says Waglith. "The ginks that write books about war and draw pictures must be cuckoo. It certainly ain't like that. Not so heroic. The books and pictures never show a fellow scared as hell. I looked at all of us when we lay against that barricade and your faces pretty near made me laugh. You all looked scared green. And I know I was scared. Efen Jim, he was scared, so scared he went looney. For that's what he must 'a' been to stand up on that barricade like he did."

"An' how's a feller ever goin' to tell any one what it wuz like," O'Connors rambles on. "What're you gonna say, Joseffi, when yer little Wops crowd aroun' an' say: 'Pop, tell us about th' Great War'?"

Novelli answers O'Connors merely with a roll of his eyeballs.

"Yer right, Novelli, that's just exactly as much as any of us'll say. Christ, you can't tell no one how bad it is. You've gotta go up an' find out yerself. How th' hell're you gonna tell any one what a bullet

sounds like, er a shell, an' what it's like to walk all night on a empty belly, an' flop on th' ground in th' mornin' in th' rain with nothin' over you but a slicker? An' how you gonna tell any one what it's like to be scared pie-eyed? Talk ain't no good. You gotta go an' find out. Yer right, Mose, these guys you wuz speakin' about can't know nothin' about it. But where are all those books you wuz talkin' about?"

"All over, Mike, there's lots of books and pictures about war—and po'try, too."

"Pawtry! Hell, I thought pawtry wuz about women an' love an' flowers! What's any one wanta write pawtry about war fer?"

"But they do—Paul Revere's Ride, you know."

"That's right. I've heard about that, but it's a funny idea, seems to me."

They fall silent and march on wearily. There is scarcely any semblance of column now. The soldiers march as they choose, singly, two by two or in groups. Traffic passes them—all going forward—and they wind in and out of it.

"Say," Whittaker speaks. "The officers showed up better'n I'd expected."

"Yeah, I'll hafta hand it to th' Loot. He done awright. He stuck to us beside that barricade until they shot 'im away."

"He was handink me musettes full of Shooshay

pans faster'n you could shoot 'em away, Mike."

"Yeah," O'Connors goes on. "Things shape up diff'rent onct you git in. Fellow from I Company wuz tellin' me 'bout their Skipper when we wuz comin' out last night. He wuz th' guy every one said they wuz gonna pump full o' lead. No one never had a chanct. That Skipper—I forget his name now—"

"Wynan," some one in the Squad prompts him.

"Yeah, that's it, Wynan. Well, Wynan got killed too quick fer any one to pump 'im full o' lead from behind. He wuz leadin' th' company agenst a machine-gun nest on th' other side o' th' river when he got his. He wuz 'way ahead o' th' company, wit' his automatic out an' he finished off that nest as he went down. Ther' ain't a guy in I Company can say anything too good 'bout him now."

"Jesus," says Gray. "Look at those niggers—didn't know they'd brought any of them over here."

He indicates a gang of negroes out of a labor battalion which is splitting stone and filling up shell holes and ditches.

"Hi, Blackboy!" O'Connors calls out at a coal-black darkey who sits on a stone, sings and listlessly uses a maul on a smaller stone posed before him. "How you like th' war?"

"Dis ain't no wa' fo' me. Had lots mo' wa 'n dis back home. Dis's stone-pile wuk."

"Well, what th' hell're you kickin' about?

Wouldn't you be doin' just th' same in some workhouse back home in Georgia?"

"Sho' Ah would. Ah ain't complainin'. Ah'm happy, don' yuh hear me singin'?"

"Moto' trucks an' caissons
Cut a mighty trench,
Have to pile de metal on
Fo' dese po' dam' French.
Diggin', diggin', diggin'—"

"But the war'll be over before he gets that stone split," Waglith comments as the column passes beyond earshot of the singing negro.

The sun mounts and begins to fall. Clouds follow it across the sky.

"Can you beat it," complains Whittaker. "Night coming—and rain with it, looks like—and still no transportation."

"God, Sarge, where's them trucks?" asks O'Connors.

"Dunno," Jackson replies. "Guess it's another night in th' rain for us."

"Nothing decent ever comes to the infantry," says Gray.

It showers. They put on slickers and slog along dejectedly. Eagerness and anticipation are suddenly depressed by the rain and chill of evening. Wearily, hopelessly, they slog on.

Along the edge of a patch of woods, the crude column drags to a halt.

"Fall out into the woods, on the right, an' pitch pup tents!" comes the command.

"God dam' it," says Whittaker. "Another night out in the rain when we might've been under cover and in billets if those trucks'd come."

"No use growlin' about it, kid," says O'Connors.

"You're a queer guy," Whittaker answers. "You kick when there's nothing wrong but get cheerful right away when everything turns out rotten."

"Sure, that's th' Irish in me."

They scoop under the surface of the ground to get dry soil to pitch their tents over. As they work, the cookers rattle up from rear, pull into the woods and make up fires.

"See, there you are," says O'Connors to Whittaker. "We're gonna git a hot meal—th' first in five days. See, there ain't no use kickin', is there?"

Gray spreads his slicker over the bottom of his hole, and arranges his single blanket over that.

"We'll use my blanket and slicker over us, eh?" says Waglith, with whom Gray shares the pup tent.

"Yeah . . . this slicker-an'-one-blanket stuff isn't so bad now, but what about when winter comes?"

"Don't think so far ahead, Corp, it makes my head ache."

"If I live that long, Corp," O'Connors puts in. "I'm gonna S.I.W., I'll tell th' world."

"What's that, Mike?" asks Whittaker.

"What's that? Say, what kind of a goddam soldier are you, anyhow?" O'Connors pauses in the preparation of the bed and looks at Whittaker, who holds the other end of the blanket. "Dontcha remember that red-headed guy in th' First Platoon who shot hisself in th' leg while we were lyin' in that woods, just before we hiked into th' town? You don't by any chanct think it wuz by accident he shot off his big toe so neat, do you? He took good aim, he did. Well, he wuz an S.I.W.* Now, do you git it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hello, dam' if there aren't some trucks now," says Gray, as a long column of camions pounds by and flaps to a halt along the edge of the woods.

"Jesus, a fellow never knows what he's gonna do next," says O'Connors. "Oh, Sarge, what's it goin' to be now? Full packs?"

"Got me," says Jackson, and looks up to see the Captain coming through the woods.

"Hustle it up, cooks," he says as he passes by the cookers. "Those're our trucks. We've got to eat quick and embus."

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* Self-inflicted wound.

Throughout the wet woods, pup tents come down and are rolled into packs. Mess kits clatter impatiently about the cookers.

2

Through a day and a night the soldiers sleep in billets . . . and awaken to another day as shafts of sunlight stream through chinks in a barn and a bugler blows pay call.

"Yah-hoo!" shouts O'Connors, kicking himself clear of the straw. "D'you hear that, Squad?"

The soldiers rustle in the straw, sit up and yawn.

"Come on," says O'Connors. "Pay an' then we'll eat!"

He pulls on his shoes and tumbles down a ladder onto a threshing floor that leads out into a yard. The others follow after, one by one.

"Say, Corp," O'Connors calls back as he makes for the road. "Stop by th' kitchen there an' see if you c'n make th' old wumman un'erstand we'll want a big mess o' eggs an' French fried in about a half-hour."

"All right. How many?"

"Half a dozen fer me—that's all I know."

Everywhere, soldiers in disarray hurry along the village road. They go hatless, with blouses gaping open, legginless and with the mud of war, dried cream colored now, caked on shoes and breeches.

"Where's M Company payin'?" asks O'Connors.

"By th' church."

"Where th' hell's th' church?"

"In front o' you. You blind? Hell, might as well ask where th' town is, fer it's mostly all church."

Near the entrance to the church, under a tree, the Captain sits on a box behind a table improvised out of a board laid between two upturned baskets. On it are bundles of French currency—100 franc notes, 50's, 20's, 10's and 5's—with silver, nickel and copper coins rolled in paper tubes.

"M Company, fall in in alphabetic order," one of the Lieutenants, sitting beside the Captain, calls out to the soldiers who mill about.

As the sergeants aid the men to place themselves properly—calling out the letters of the alphabet—O'Connors sees Gray coming up and beckons him.

"Didja cinch 'em?"

"Yeah, she's got plenty. I ordered three dozen eggs an' potatoes for fifteen men. That'll give us three Frog portions each. I gave her five francs to show her we meant business."

"Where'n hell'd you git th' five francs from?"

"Left over from last pay day."

"That's so. You didn't come to Parus. It wuz poor old Jim celebrated wit' me there. An' to-day I'm gonna celebrate again, right in th' middle o' this two-by-four burg."

Sergeant Jackson, who overhears the mention of food, tells Gray that the cookers—traveling along behind the trucks at a tired horse's slow pace—aren't in yet.

"But a truck's just dumped rations down th' road, by th' pump. After pay, each squad can draw one-day rations. You'll have to fix 'em up yourselves."

"Rations, hell, Sarge," O'Connors answers. "We're fixed. Long's we've got pay, we don't need no Army rations."

The Lieutenant commences calling out names. As each soldier steps up to the table, the Captain makes change and hands him his money. No one's total is very large after all deductions are made—allotments to families, insurance premiums and installment payments on Liberty Bonds.

"Anderson, Ole," the Lieutenant calls.

"Knocked off in th' Jute woods," some one answers.

The Captain puts the money he started to count out back in the bundles.

"Allen, Stanley G."

"Shell shocked an' went to the rear," Gray answers.

"Gray, Hugh, Corporal."

"Here!" and Gray takes his pay.

"Marzulak, James."

"Bumped off at Fismes," O'Connors replies.

"Novelli, Giuseppe."

"Ummm!"

"O'Connors, Michael."

"Ha-oww!"

"Waglith, Emmanuel."

"Hya!"

"Whittaker, Harvey."

"Ho!"

They pocket their pay and hurry back to billets. They clamber up the ladder into the loft and clatter down with mess kits. They hesitate a moment in the yard.

"You do th' talkin', Corp," says O'Connors. "Yer strongest at th' lingo. Go in an' see if it ain't ready yet."

Gray enters the kitchen and finds the old woman bending over the hearth, eggs sizzling in a frying pan she holds in her hands.

"*Bientôt prêt,*" she says.

"*Comment—combien?*" Gray stutters.

"*Quinze francs les œufs—dix francs les pommes—ce qui fait vingt-cinq francs en tout.*"

Gray checks up on the price by opening and closing the fingers and thumb of one hand before the aged woman.

"*C'est ça,*" she replies.

He goes to the open door.

"Twenty-five francs for the pot—five francs ante each—come across."

He takes the money back to the woman, who asks

them to come into the kitchen and eat off a large, round table that stands in one corner.

"This's better'n the woods," comments Whittaker, as the old woman serves them.

"Dam' right, an' we'll ask her to wash up our kits afterwards," says Waglith.

"*Lait?*" Gray queries, but the woman doesn't understand.

He squats on the floor and goes through a pantomime of milking a cow.

"*Mais oui,*" the woman cackles, brings out an earthenware jug and fills each tin cup.

"You know yer stuff, Corp," says O'Connors. "It's a lucky squad's got a Corporal c'n handle th' lingo like you."

"Boy, isn't that good!" exclaims Whittaker, as he tastes his milk.

"Runs right down to my toes."

"It's the foist time I effer drank milk," says Waglith.

"Didn't you never have no mother?" asks O'Connors.

"Since then, you boob."

"Now, Corp," says O'Connors as he lights a cigarette. "Ask her if she ain't got a daughter, 'bout twenty-one, I c'd have fer dessert."

"Aw, any daughter that old woman'd have'd be about fifty—if she wasn't dead yet."

"Guess yer right, Mose. You got a better head'n I have. I hafta admit that. You own a shoe store. Let's adjourn to th' *es*taminet an' have somepin to drink."

O'Connors takes his pay out of his pocket, counts it over and puts it back.

"Sixty-five francs an' fifty centimes," he says. "That sure ain't over-pay fer th' last month's work."

"No double time for overtime in the Army," says Waglith.

"We'd be millionaires if there was," says Whittaker.

They leave their empty mess kits on the table, pointing to a pail of water in a corner of the kitchen, thank the woman as best they can and go out.

The village stretches for not more than a quarter mile along the road and possesses no other streets. The white houses, with red-tiled roofs, stand close together on each side of the road. Manure is piled in front of many of them. Here and there is a small shop—butcher shop, bakery, grocery. The great, steepled church is set back from the road in the middle of the village. Diagonally across from it is the village pump, its place now heaped with U.S. Army rations—tins, wooden boxes and burlap sacks of bread and meat. At either end of the village is an *estaminet*.

"I'm going over there to get a cake of soap," says

Gray, indicating the grocery. "For sometime to-day I'm going to try and find that creek we crossed coming into town."

"Awright, look fer me in th' saloon acrost th' way," O'Connors answers.

By the time Gray painstakingly buys a cake of soap and rejoins the Squad in the *estaminet*, O'Connors has had a couple of drinks and is looking ravenously at the middle-aged woman who handles the bottles. Novelli, too, has ordered drink for drink and is talking Italian to the woman, who appears to understand.

"Old—old—I ask her where young girls," he says to O'Connors.

" 'Nother coinyak all 'round," O'Connors answers. "Five now th' Corp's back wit' us."

He holds up his outstretched hand:

"Coinyak—sank!" he calls to the woman, and turns to Gray: "See, Corp, I've learned th' lingo, too. Sank. That's what it does. Sinks right down."

"Gosh, Mike, you've got going quick!"

"Sure, Corp, that's th' way I am. Whole-hearted. No use jus' playin' wit' likker an' a good time. Better go right to it. . . . 'Nother round—sank—sank—sank."

Gray turns to the others:

"If we don't get going soon, we'll never get any wash-up to-day."

"Aw, Corp," says O'Connors. "What's th' use washin' when you can't change yer shirt? My O.D.'s two mont's old now an' I ain't got 'nother."

"We've got all evening to drink," says Gray. "Who's coming to try an' find that creek?"

"Aw, Corp, you allus wanta wet nurse us," says O'Connors.

"See you later, Mike," says Gray as he gets up. Waglith and Whittaker follow him.

"Sank coinyak," calls O'Connors, as the others go out the door of the café. "No—two, they've quit on us," he calls again, and extends only two fingers towards the café mistress.

On the way down the road, Whittaker sees a girl looking out of a window of the most pretentious house of the village.

"Jees, there's a . . . lotta people living here." He looks quickly at the others to see if they've seen.

"Hell, what makes you think so?" Gray replies. "Don't look like much of a place to me."

"Well, I mean for so near the Front."

"Ain't so near," says Waglith. "About forty miles back, I guess."

Gray interrupts as he sees a soldier hurrying towards them along the road.

"What's up?" the Corporal asks.

"Mail's bein' handed out by th' church!"

"Straight stuff?" asks Gray.

"Sure, no kiddin'."

"Come on!" Gray shouts as he turns around. "Th' creek'll stay there!"

"Christmas *has* come," Waglith remarks, as he and Whittaker turn and follow at a run.

3

Whittaker leans across the sill of an open window of the pretentious house. He jerks his head towards the outside and points to himself.

"Come on, you understand," he says, coaxingly. "Promenay!"

He pushes his cap farther back on his head and grins into the window.

A giggle comes from inside. Then a girl's voice: "*Tout de suite.*"

Whittaker looks about anxiously. He turns his back to the window, rests his elbows on the sill and tries to appear unconcernedly loafing. Furtively, however, he watches the door.

It opens and out of it comes a girl with dark, crinkly hair and pink cheeks. With her hand on the knob, she pauses and looks towards the church. Quickly she closes the door behind her.

. . "*Par ici—vite!*" she says, whisks around in rear of the house and through a gate into a strip of garden. Whittaker follows eagerly.

The garden is walled in cozily, thus hidden from the view of any one on the road outside. Through it are gravel paths winding among fruit trees and beds of flowers in bloom. Over all is a hum and drone of insects.

"God, this's great!" Whittaker exclaims. He is astonished at the existence of so lovely a place in the simple village.

"I feel real here!" The garden is like a momentary shelter, a refuge out of the war.

"*C'est joli ici?*" the girl offers, aware of Whittaker's admiration as he looks about.

He understands easily enough, the English equivalent being on his own tongue.

"God, yes," he says.

"Sit down here," the girl says in French, indicating a bench. "I can stay only a little while."

"Jees," says Whittaker to himself. "Hope none of the others get onto this."

As he sits down beside the girl, he looks at her squarely:

"Listen, if any one else comes around here, don't you have anything to do with 'em, see."

The girl shakes her head uncomprehendingly.

Whittaker points to her and then to himself: "Me—your—friend." He waves his arm: "Others —out there—no good."

"*Autres?* What others?"

"The rest of the guys in the town. Wait a minute."

He takes a small dictionary out of his blouse pocket.

"They're bad eggs," he says, turning the pages. "What the hell's the word for bad? Bad—bad—there it is. They're mawvais. They might do wrong to you."

"*Vous êtes drôle,*" says the girl, with a smile and quite without any idea of what Whittaker is talking about. He looks at her, now, and smiles too.

"It sure is great here," he says again, leans back against the bench and looks about.

"Bullets sound like that," he indicates the buzz of bees about a nearby flower bed.

"*Je ne comprends pas?*"

"Bullets—dzing-dzing-dzing—at the Front—rat-tat-tat-tat-tat."

"*Ah oui, maintenant je comprends. Pauvre soldat.* How old are you?"

"Huh?"

"*Age?*"

"Oh! Twenty."

"*Combien?*" She points to his hand. He understands, holds it up, opens and closes it four times.

"*Moi—dix-sept,*" and she, too, counts with her fingers.

"She's all right," says Whittaker to himself. "This is more fun than I thought it would be."

He quits the bench and sprawls on the turf, which is cool and green and soft. He feels deliciously content.

"If it'll only last," he says.

"I've a brother in the Army—a *sous-officier*," the girl says.

"Officers, yeah, they're rotten." Whittaker doesn't quite understand. "The war's hell."

The girl understands the dismal way he shakes his head, as he lies on his back and gazes into the sky, less aware of her, apparently, than of the peace and comfort and beauty of the moment—or of his thoughts of war. She never saw an American until yesterday, when the infantry marched into the village. And this one is good-looking, with his pale face, large features, curly black hair and dark eyes. She gets up from the bench and joins him on the grass, sitting daintily two feet away.

"What's your name?" she asks.

He doesn't understand that at all. She points at him:

"*Georges—Guillaume—Henri?*"

"Aw, my name, that's what you're after," he laughs. "Harvey."

"*Arvee—c'est joli, ça.*" She laughs.

Whittaker turns his head and stares at her, sitting there on the grass. She is pretty in her white dress with red bow over the shoulder. A delicate scent reaches his nostrils. He doesn't know if it's the girl's or that of the flowers. It revives a nostalgia.

"I'd like to be home."

"*Comment?*"

"Home—patrie—over there," and he waves his arm towards the setting sun.

"Where are you from in America? New York?"

"New York—unh-unh—Okla-homa."

"Where's that?"

"Out West."

"*Ah oui, dans l'Ouest.*"

He is stirred by her interest. As she leans towards him, he notices her parted, red lips and the double line of her youthful breasts.

"Where do you live here?" she asks.

He admires the curve of her calf against the grass.

"Huh?"

She explains by putting her cheek against her hands, with the palms joined.

"God, that gets me," he says to himself. And aloud: "Barn—loft—up the street." He points towards the dried grass over the earth of one of the flower beds, then out into the village.

"We've an extra room none of your officers has

taken," she says. "I'll ask *Maman* if you can come to us?"

Whittaker is lost in the many words, but when the girl points to the house and makes that gesture with her cheek against the back of her joined hands, he believes he understands.

"If that's the idea, I'm in clover. Boy, that'd be great."

The girl is pleased by the joyful lines of his face and smiles.

"God, if I could get a room there and be clear of O'Connors, the damned bully, and that Jew and the dirty Wop. Oh, gosh!"

The girl smiles at him and her eyes sparkle. He looks at her, quizzically:

"Is she all right?" he asks himself. "Does she mean anything more by that business with her cheek?"

He's a bit puzzled. Maybe the girl isn't quite all right? He recalls the talks at Training Camp, before they came over. From them, a fellow got the idea he'd catch something if he passed a French girl on the street and didn't hold his breath.

"Where's your mother?" The girl doesn't understand. "Mamma?"

"Oh, Mamma's in church," and she points.

"Think I could sleep up there to-night?" he asks, and points at the house.

She doesn't answer, but looks at him questioningly, charmingly.

"Hell," he says to himself. "I can't get anything from a little pettin'."

He reaches over and touches her knee with his finger: "Pretty dress."

"*Comment?*"

"Pretty—joley."

"*Ah oui, très jolie.* I made it myself."

She doesn't draw away. He points out various portions of her dress, touching her body each time.

"Do you love me?" he says.

"*Comment?*"

"Aimay?"

She laughs: "*Sois gentil.*"

Twilight thickens, and with it the boldness of his caresses. He edges closer and touches her hair.

"A kiss?" he asks.

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?*"

"Baissay?"

"*Oh, mais non!*"

He sits up and turns towards her. Swiftly, he takes her by each shoulder. She twists sideways out of his grasp.

"Oh, hell," he says aloud. He puts his hands in his lap, looks down and wriggles his feet unconcernedly.

He knows she leans towards him. He doesn't look

up. Now he catches the odor of her hair. He knows she's close. Quickly, he raises his head and kisses her on the lips. She jumps away. Then, to his confusion, she leans across and kisses him.

"God, she's easy," he thinks. "That's the quickest I ever saw. Wonder if she's all right?" He is a bit worried and withdraws slightly. The girl edges closer. She picks a blade of grass, trails it across his cheek, tickles his nose with it.

"God, she gets me," Whittaker says to himself. A great deal goes through his mind, quickly.

"The war," he thinks. "Hell, why not?"

He puts his arms about her. She doesn't pull away and, for the fraction of a moment, that cools him again. Then he yields. He can't withstand her odor, the warmth of her body. He tightens his arms about her. They lie together on the grass and he feels her body pulse against his . . .

A whistle blows loudly, shrilly, and the two sit up, startled. It blows again.

"Oh, it's only out on the road," says Whittaker, with a nervous laugh. "But, Christ, what does it mean?" he adds.

He hears a disgruntled voice:

"Fall in—full packs—we're gonna move out."

All the ardor of a moment ago leaves. He feels completely flushed.

"Oh, that's too much," he says aloud. "Going up again after thirty-six hours in billets. It's a damned, dirty shame!"

"What's the trouble, Arvee?"

"Gotta leave—parti—toot sweet—oh, *hell!*"

The girl only vaguely understands. The whistle and the strange words out on the road haven't flushed her. Her stirred passion urges her on.

"Come," she says, and holds out her arms.

Whittaker disregards her. He doesn't see her any longer. He sees days and nights stretching dismally ahead; rain and shell-fire; the machine-guns and finally the blunt, awful helmets of the Germans. One by one, the Squad is being killed off.

"Oh, I don't want to go up again," and he buries his face in his hands.

The whistle blows again, and Sergeant Jackson's voice sounds:

"Shake it up, Fourth Platoon, th' rest o' th' Company's linin' up!"

Whittaker gets up off the ground. He isn't aware that the girl holds his hand, and that he pulls his own away rudely as he starts towards the other end of the garden. As he reaches the gate, he turns back. The girl has followed him, uncomprehending.

"What's your name and address?" He takes a note-book out of his left-hand, blouse pocket, where he carries old letters in the belief that, maybe one

day, the wad would deflect a bullet or bit of High Explosive.

"Write," he commands. "I might be able to come back."

She understands and takes the stub of pencil and note-book.

"*Lorette Agner, 12, Grande Rue, Contrisson, Haute-Marne.*" She says it aloud as she writes in the dark.

"Thanks."

"I'm sorry, *soldat*, good-by." She kisses him by the gate.

Out on the road, the units are lined up.

"Where's Whittaker?" He hears Gray's voice.

"Haven't seen him all evenink," Waglith answers.

"Here I am. I'm coming, soon's I get my pack an' equipment."

Reluctantly, Whittaker fetches his stuff out of the loft, goes back to the road and falls in. The Squad stands complete now with its four soldiers and Corporal. Novelli and O'Connors sway on their feet.

"All there now, Corporals?" asks Jackson.

Down along the line, each corporal answers successively:

"All here."

From farther up the road comes the Captain's voice:

"Are you ready, Platoon Commanders?"

"All ready, Sir," four voices reply successively.

Again the Captain's voice:

"Squads right—Marr-ch!"

"Where we going, Hugh?" Whittaker asks, as the squads swing about and form column.

"Dunno, but the rumor is that we're going up on a new sector, into a big drive."

The column goes silently through the village. At the door of the pretentious house, Whittaker sees a white dress. He looks away quickly, out of embarrassment or pain at the quick recollection of his loss.

"Did any of you spot the swell dame in that big house?" asks Waglith. "Must be the Mayor's daughter. I was figurink on my chances around there if we'd stayed longer."

"Oh, were you!" snaps Whittaker.

"Sure I was and why not? Oh, you had her lined up, did you? Say, Squad, you get that? Whittaker'd begun to fall in luff back there."

"Shut up, you kike!"

"Aw, don't take it so hard, and don't call me dirty names. I'm so used to it I don't mind any longer."

"Hell, what're you guys scrappin' 'bout? I don' care fer nuthin'," O'Connors voice blusters thickly. "Wimmin er big sectors er new drives er nuthin'. I've had a big drunk 'n' spent all my pay. Bring on yer goddam Dutchmen!"

4

Under cover of dusk the infantry straggles out of a patch of woods, across an open field and waits, in groups, along the edge of a road.

"Forr-ward!"

The drawn-out command comes down from ahead, where the column gets under way. With a tightening of pack-straps across shoulders and a crunch of steel hobs against the macadam, the groups fall into proper place in the long, double file.

"This's gittin' to be a habit," growls O'Connors.

"It's a damned, dirty shame!" adds Gray. "Two days' rest an' then this all over again."

"Why'd you guys choin the Army?" asks Waglith, who carries his slight weight easily.

"That's a cinch," answers O'Connors. "'Cause I wuz out o' work an' had to git my board an' keep somehow."

Gray laughs: "I fell for the brass bands, the flags and the talk. I thought I was patriotic."

"An' now the Army's hiked the patriotism out of you, eh?" puts in Waglith.

"Patriotism—hell!" chorus the others.

"That bunk's fer th' rear," comments O'Connors. "It don't belong up here. We're caught, roped in an' anything we do we goddam' well hafta do . . .

Look at us now? Here's th' fourth goddam night o' hikin'. Who'd use his feet from sunset to sunrise if he didn't hafta? An' pull off an' hide in a dirty woods fer th' day, where a guy can't sleep fer th' flies? An' do it all on two meals a day? Who'd do that if he didn't hafta?"

"Yeah," says Gray. "An' all because some one's called a brand new war."

"Dam' right," says Waglith. "We haven't seen a civilian Frog since the foist night. Since then it's been all Army."

"It's goin' to be a helluva war, too," O'Connors says. "Judgin' by all that stuff stored up behind. It's gonna be a big drive an' we're gonna be sold front row seats—you c'n bet yer ass on that."

"But it looks like it would be easier this time," says Waglith. "Now we know there's somethink behind us. We never saw anythink but ourselves up in the other place."

"Aw, I guess there wuz just as much behind us up there, Mose, only we didn't see it. What's behind takes good care it don't git too far for'ard. Those guys back of us—th' artillery, th' wire stringers, th' medicos an' all th' rest—they're afraid to git too close to th' Jerries an' too far away from the'r wimmin an' the'r chow carts."

"Mebbe so, Mike."

Now the column goes through a village stricken

by shell-fire. It is dark and desolate. A few soldiers move about, but they go carefully, hugging the shadows of the houses. Beyond the village, camouflage is strung overhead and laced alongside the road. The country which stretches away is barren, uncultivated and dotted with uncut timber.

"Now we know we're back in th' goddam war!"

"Yeah," says Gray. "Notice—it's quiet now? We're not so far off from the Front now."

"Suits me," says Waglith. "I'd sooner get there than keep up this awful night woik, like Jim used to say—rudder git killed dan live to hike ferever—but, Jees, I hope that ain't an omen, 'cause I said that."

The column begins to straggle. Feet are sore and intestines are awry. From time to time, down along the column of twos, a man falls out. He casts his pack, loosens his belt and squats over the ditch along the road. The units become disorganized. Only the frequent and long halts enable the files to keep contact.

"Where's Whittaker?" asks Gray, and looks about. "He's been straggling ever since we left Contrisson."

"He don't like us any more," Waglith answers. "He's been queer ever since I pointed out the Mayor's daughter, back there in Contrisson. Guess she spoke to him an' it toined his head."

"Guess it wuz me turned his head, Mose," says O'Connors. "That first night's hike, when he begun to boast o' what a good thing he wuz onto back there an' I told him he wuz too young to lose his cherry. He ain't spoke to me since."

Some distance behind the others Whittaker, with head bent down, straggles sullenly.

"Just when I had something decent lined up," he complains to himself, "the Sergeant blows his whistle an' I'm cheated out of that soft bed an' that French chicken. A dam', dirty trick."

Fear of the war grows in the soil of the lost opportunity.

"An' now the war—O God! If only I could get a blighty—a soft wound through the hand, or the calf, or the foot. By God, I'll bitch 'em, if I have to put my hand up an' catch a bullet. I'll get back to that town somehow."

As he goes along, his thoughts circulate at the bottom of an abysmal pit of dark despair.

Now the road penetrates a woods—no mere patch—but a great, dark forest. It seems alive. Everywhere is movement. Shapes show up indistinctly and muffled sounds come out of it. Batteries of 75's pull off the road and the horses snort as they drag the guns between the trees. Artillerymen give orders, curse, thrash horses and group about the wheels of caissons. They dig emplacements for the guns

and shelters for themselves, and string tiny lanterns on the branches of trees. Along the road, shells are heaped under camouflage coverings. There is scarcely an interval between the piles.

"Something's sure gonna happen here!"

"Glad we're not on the other end!"

"Maybe there's chust as much over there."

"Say," says O'Connors. "Notice how these woods smell all th' same? Earth, gas an' somepin putrid."

"Hope it's not going to be another woods like Death Valley—where Shorty got his," says Whittaker.

Gray looks around: "Hello, Whittaker. Decide to come back to us? I've been looking for you."

"Oh, I was just taking it easy for a while," Whittaker replies. He caught up as they entered the forest, fearful of becoming separated from the others in its darkness.

They see the Captain stop beside Sergeant Jackson, close to the Last Squad:

"Sergeant, at ten-thirty"—he looks at the luminous dial of his wrist watch—"that's in a half-hour now, a barrage is going to be laid down. It's the preparatory fire for a big offensive we're headed for. It's going to sound like all hell let loose. Warn your platoon. We'll hold the present column of twos as long as there's no counter-battery fire. If any shells come over and burst close, we'll go into

column o' files, six paces between men. Warn your platoon against straggling. If there's any enemy retaliation, it'll be aimed at the artillery here. The sooner we get clear of it, the better."

The Captain passes on.

"Awright, Sarge, we got it here," says O'Connors. "Don't waste any o' yer precious breath on us. We know all about it. We got eyes 'n' ears 's well 's feet."

The infantry goes on . . . while through the forest and across the dark ravines tiny lights flicker on. Then the barrage falls, far away, at first, like the distant drumming of innumerable drums. Steadily, the sound thrums, and grows, until it rolls into a colossal roar, guns everywhere going off as if detonated by a giant fuse burning for miles through the forest.

The crash reaches the infantry. A long muzzle shows up overhead. Near it, a man moves a lamp. Flames spurt out at the column. It halts in its tracks, and the soldiers throw arms across faces against the threat of fire. A roar deafens. Everywhere unseen guns vomit. The earth underfoot quakes and vibrates. The pace of the column quickens. It hurries through the din, downhill into ravines and up slopes, away from the breeches towards the aim of the great guns.

Along the road, the traffic is enormous, with everything at a standstill but the infantry and the ma-

chine-guns. The snake-like column of foot troops winds easily in and out of the jam, while the machine-gunners whip their mules through ditches and around trees on the edge of the forest. Engineers corduroy patches of road, while behind, ammunition and ration trucks line up solidly and batteries of 75's stand in column, horses in traces and drivers shouting loudly against the crash of the guns in rear.

"Alley—alley up ahead! Christ, what's th' trouble?"

"If a battery starts shellin' this road now it'll put th' whole goddam Army outa commission."

"Don't worry, there ain't gonna be no counter-battery stuff yet awhile—not's long's those shells're landin' 'bout th' Boche guns."

"Hello, look at th' doughboys! They're gettin' outa harm's way fast enough. You'd think they wuz goin' to th' rear—not for'ard—th' rate they're movin'."

Farther on, the column comes upon artillerymen and ambulance drivers who are worn out with waiting. They lie rolled in overcoats and blankets, asleep in the ditches and edge of the woods alongside the jammed road. Trucks stand dead, and horses patiently, in column.

The infantry debouches out of the forest. Here, the road is empty and the country quiet. The concussion of the guns is now behind. Heads buzz and

ears ring. Overhead, the sound of the projectiles passing through the air is like a wind against a canopy.

"Pheww!" says Gray, and his voice sounds strange in his ears. "That was awful!"

"That's tough on th' nerves, I'll say," says O'Connors. "Sounded like an earthquake."

"Don't see how anybody could stand up against that," says Waglith. "Guess we'll go on for a long while yet before we come on any Chermans."

The road bisects flat, open country. Here, the only traffic is made up of groups of French infantry, which drift rearwards, Chauchats balanced across shoulders. They laugh and talk.

"Lookit those Frogs!" exclaims O'Connors. "They act like they didn't know a war wuz on!"

"There ain't—for them," says Whittaker, bitterly. "They're going to the rear and it's us 's going up to take their place. Lucky bums!"

Ahead, a company of infantry emerges quietly out of a bit of trench. The soldiers appear only half-awake. They shiver in the cool, night air. With a few whispered commands, the company forms platoon columns and moves off across the fields. The flashes of the guns from the woods in rear glisten off the fixed bayonets.

"Say, where'n hell you guess th' lines are, Corp?"

asks O'Connors, in a lower voice. "Those guys act like they're settin' off fer an attack!"

"Close, now, I guess," Gray answers. "Only I don't see how there can be much Front left by now. That barrage must be blastin' the first lines all to hell."

Whittaker strains his eyes forward, then looks around over his shoulder.

As the column reaches a crossroads on the outskirts of a village, a command rolls down:

"Take cover in th' trench on th' right o' th' road!"

Simultaneously, from far ahead, comes the quick drone of a shell. It sirens swiftly into a shriek that culminates in a close burst. As an individual, the column disappears through the camouflage of leafy boughs into the scarcely distinguishable trench-line. Flying particles of metal sing through the air, while smoke and the fumes of burnt powder seep into the trench.

"All here?" asks Gray, hoarsely.

"Yeah, Corp, but I felt that shell'd made a direct hit on my head when I landed at th' bottom of this trench," says Waglith.

"That's th' first shell this trip up," comments O'Connors. "That's one gun's lived through th' barrage, an' I guess there'll soon be plenty o' others."

Whittaker is curled up at the bottom of the trench.

"Dunno if we're gonna stay here or not," says Gray, as he sees him. "Oh, Sergeant, you there?" he calls.

"Yep."

"Shall we unroll packs?"

"Dunno how long we're gonna stay here, but I'm gonna bed down . . . fer here comes th' rain."

A few drops snap against the camouflage. Quickly, it settles into a steady rain. The soldiers bunk down, feet at the bottom of the trench and bodies lying upward against its slope. They roll blankets and shelter-halves and slickers around them and tip helmets over noses to drain away the dripping water.

5

Whittaker awakes, stiff, sore and shivering with cold. He opens his eyes upon a dead German, a yard away, with the top of his head blown out. He looks away quickly.

"Why'd you pick that corpse as yer bunky?" asks O'Connors.

"God, I saw him last night when we turned in here, but I thought he was one of us."

"Thank God he ain't me. He's a sight. He oughta taken better care o' hisself. He's like a horrible example to us."

"Can it, Mike, you give me the heeby-jeebies. I'm goin' to get outa here."

Whittaker pokes his head up through the camouflage. Curiosity has already brought Waglith up out of the trench. He is silhouetted against the gray sky, as he holds aloft the arm of a dead German and tries to work a ring off the stiff finger.

"Take yer hand-ax to it, Mose," advises O'Connors, who leans with Whittaker against the side of the trench. "You'll never git nowhere that way."

"Some guys've got queer taste," remarks Whittaker, as he and O'Connors crawl up onto the ground.

The village is razed by shell-fire. Along the road, and in the yards of the tumbled houses, German dead lie thick. Each corpse possesses its individual grotesqueness. One is rolled up in a ball. Another is stretched on his back, arms distended as if on a cross. Another lies belly down, so flat against the ground that the hump of his pack projects awkwardly. Close by, one lies on the edge of the road, covered with feathers.

"My God!" O'Connors ejaculates. "Was he stuffed—er what?" He goes over to the corpse and sees that the German, armed with an anti-tank rifle, had placed a feather cushion against his shoulder as a pad.

"That barrage sure did blast 'em out," says O'Connors, as he looks about. "Struck 'em down as

they ran fer shelter, I guess. An' th' few that got underground got kicked off by machine-guns when they come out later. Jesus, I'm glad I'm not a Jerry to-day!"

"But look there." Whittaker points.

Across the level plain, which stretches away desolately in the gray dawn, lies an irregular line of American dead. Strewn among the brown figures are disabled tanks, noses buckled into shell-holes or hind-ends fallen back into trenches.

"By God, th' Jerries put up a fight, at that," O'Connors says with admiration.

"It's sickening, Mike. Fellow can't go anywhere without steppin' on a corpse." He sees Gray emerge out of the trench. "Wonder where the lines are?" he asks.

"Up ahead a couple of kilos, I guess. Looks as if our front line'd passed over here last night, just before we landed in the trench there. That one back there hasn't been dead long."

He shouts towards Waglith:

"Say, Mose, if you want to play with the dead so bad, come on an' give us a hand with the guy that's clutterin' up our home."

Waglith doesn't answer. He is fixed before the entrance to a dugout and stares intently down the shaft.

"What's up?" calls Gray.

"There's some one down here!" Waglith calls back, excitedly. "An' I think it's a Cherman!"

As the others go over, he shouts down the shaft: "*Ist jemand da?*"

"*Ja wohl,*" comes a weak reply.

"Come on up," Waglith answers in German. "No one's going to hurt you up here."

"Better stand aside," he says to the group about the mouth of the shaft. "Can't tell what's up."

He takes a few steps back, to one side, and trains his rifle on the opening.

Slowly, the sound of feet on the wooden rungs of a ladder draws closer and two disheveled Germans appear at the entrance. They are spattered with blood. The hand of one is gone and his face gashed. An arm of the other is stained with dried blood, from the shoulder down.

Waglith slings his rifle over his shoulder and officiously takes them in charge, talking fluent German.

"Where's the Dressink Station?" he calls out.

"Across the road—see the sign."

He goes off, calling back over his shoulder at the others:

"Poor guys. Their wounds stink already."

"Can you beat that?" says O'Connors. "Mose acts like he wuz right at home wit' 'em!"

"Well," says Gray. "The next job's to get that guy out of our trench."

"Awright, Corp, I'm yer man," says O'Connors. "I c'n handle 'em dead er alive to-day."

As they approach the trench, they see the corpse poke through the camouflage, heave over the edge, roll over and over for several yards and settle stiffly. Novelli's head and shoulders appear behind it. He grins as he climbs out of the trench.

"Looks like it wuz only a one-man job after all," O'Connors laughs.

The others turn away, but Whittaker goes on and into the trench.

"Now he's out of the way, I can sleep again," he says to himself, as he rolls up in his blanket. "Thank God I don't dream, or I'd go mad. Sleep's one way out of it anyhow . . ."

He awakes at a whirr overhead and the two shrill blasts of a whistle—the under-cover signal. The sun shines through the camouflage and across it passes the shadow of an airplane. A sheet of white paper flutters down after it and is caught in the net of the camouflage, which is like a grape arbor overhead.

"What's that anyway?" Whittaker asks himself, as he reaches up and pulls the sheet through a hole.

It is a single sheet, printed in English, with a heading: "NEVER SAY DIE!"

"Don't die till you have to!" he reads the text. He is wide awake with interest now.

"WHAT BUSINESS HAVE YOU TO DIE FOR FRANCE, FOR ALSACE-LORRAINE, OR FOR ENGLAND IN FRANCE?

"Isn't it better anyhow to live than to die, no matter for how 'glorious' a cause? Isn't it better to live and come back to the old folks at home, than to rot in the shell holes and trenches of France?

"You have had to hear many high falutin words about 'liberty,' 'humanity,' and 'making the world safe for democracy,' but honest now, aren't these catch words merely sugar coating to the bitter pill of making you spend wretched months far from home? Do you really believe those German soldier boys in their faded gray uniforms on the other side of 'No Man's Land' are hot on the trail of your liberties?

"Just like you, they want the war to end with honor so they can go back to their home folks. All they want is a chance to live and let live.

"And so, if it should happen to you to fall into their hands, you will find that they will treat you fair enough on the principle of 'LIVE AND LET LIVE.' Why run any more chances than you have to? You might as well be a free boarder in Germany till the war is over. YOU DON'T WANT TO DIE TILL YOU HAVE TO!"

He finishes it and hears voices outside.

"That's what they say, but I wouldn't like to trust myself to 'em," says Gray's voice. "That's just propaganda."

"Guess they got a sheet of it, too," says Whittaker to himself, looking down at the paper in his hand. He listens.

"Sure, it's propaganda," Waglith's voice answers. "But, Corp, that doesn't keep it from beink true. Sure they'd like us to go ofer to 'em. Every one who goes ofer to 'em's chust one less enemy."

"Yeah, but what'd they do after you got over? Treat you as sweet as they say there?"

"Why not? Did I do anythink to those two wounded ones that come outa that dugout? And I guess if I'd been them, it'd been chust the same."

"No, you're not a German. It's not the same."

"I'm pretty near Cherman. My mother and father were born in Galicia . . ."

"Where's that?" Gray interrupts.

"On the eastern border of Chermany. I speak Cherman. I understand 'em. They're chust about the same as us, Corp. They're human beinks too."

"Maybe so, but they're trained different. Have we sunk any *Lusitanias?*"

"No, but there wasn't any Cherman *Lusitania* to sink."

"Well, all right, you can take your chances with 'em, but I'm going to stay on this side of the fence just as long as I can."

"Aw, hell, Corp, I'm not thinkink of goink ofer to 'em. I'm chust arguink that a lot of this stuff we

read an' hear about is bull. You can chust bet the Chermans're told the same about us."

"Sure, you're all right, Mose, but that dam' sheet might make another kind of guy go over to 'em—a fellow like Whittaker." And the voices pass out of hearing.

"Dam' right I'd go over—if I could," Whittaker mutters to himself, spitefully, looking down at the sheet of propaganda in his hand. "But how's a guy goin' to go over without gettin' killed? Certainly wasn't any chance of goin' over up in that last place we were. Oh, hell, a guy can't buck the Army."

He lets the bit of paper flutter to the bottom of the trench. Dispirited, he turns his head and his eyes rest on O'Connors, asleep. Suddenly, he recalls that incident O'Connors spoke of—the red-haired fellow in the First Platoon who S.I.W.'d!

"By God, that's the way! Why didn't I think of that before! What a fool I've been!"

No one is in sight, up or down the trench. Only O'Connors, who snores.

"By God, I'll do it! I'll bitch 'em all, th' Sergeant, th' Captain, th' whole dam' Army!"

He reaches for his rifle, quite casually, as if he was about to clean it. He lifts the bolt and looks into the chamber.

He feels triumphant. He gloats in a sense of power.

"O'Connors might be faking?"

He places the rifle as if to take the thong and oiler out of the butt. The muzzle rests close to the toes of his left foot. He pulls the trigger. The rifle jumps up and back. He feels nothing. He realizes he missed.

"What th' hell?" he hears O'Connors' voice.

He goes panicky: "Gotta do it now, quick, or O'Connors'll report me."

He works the bolt, puts the butt against his shoulder and takes good aim. As he presses the trigger, O'Connors' hand strikes the rifle downward. An impact seems to crush his leg and a terrifically sharp pain shoots through it.

"Oh, Jesus, Mike, I've shot myself!" He is frightened now. "Oh, Jesus, my leg's blown off!"

"What th' hell're you tryin' to do?" O'Connors is furious. "Kill yerself an' me too?"

"Oh, God, Mike, help me, th' pain's awful—terrible!"

"You God dam' fool!"

"I can't move, Mike—it hurts—oh, Jesus, why'd I do that!"

Gray, Waglith, Novelli and Sergeant Jackson come up, drawn by the noise.

"What's up?" asks Jackson.

"Whittaker's pumped a bullet into hisself—while

he wuz cleanin' his rifle," O'Connors answers. "Looks like his leg wuz broke. Better git a litter."

"First Aid Men!" Gray shouts, hands megaphoned about his mouth.

Two litter bearers come up. Whittaker cries out frantically with pain while they load him on it. Then, moaning, they carry him off towards the Dressing Station.

"Wasn't that an S.I.W., O'Connors?" asks Jackson. "It ain't so simple to shoot yourself cleanin' a rifle."

"Not a bit of it, Sarge. I wuz right beside him at th' time. He wuz takin' th' thong an' oiler outa th' butt when it went off. He wouldn't 'a' hurt hisself so bad if he'd meant to—that's sure."

"It's a hell of a soldier can't clean his rifle without blowin' his leg off." Jackson goes off muttering: "Funny how they all do it just before we go up."

Gray takes O'Connors aside.

"Guess Jackson missed that first shot, but I didn't," says Gray. "Didn't he do that on purpose?"

"Yeah, Corp, I figure he did—or maybe I did most of it. Listen, it wuz this way. I wuz asleep an' th' first shot woke me an' scared hell outa me. I thought th' Jerries wuz on me. I looked up an' savvyed what wuz up soon's I seen th' kid aimin' at his foot. I didn't think quick enough an' knocked th' rifle down instead o' up. That's what caused th'

trouble. I guess th' bullet plowed down 'long his shin bone. He'll likely lose his leg. I feel bad about it, Corp. That's why I made it out an accident to th' Sarge. An' if th' kid hadn't intended to S.I.W. he'd 'a' spoken up quick enough."

"All right, Mike, I won't bleat. If the Skipper wants to look into it, you're the only witness an' you tell your own story. That stands with me."

"Good fer you, Corp. Thanks."

V

The sky is a faultless blue and the country quiet, as the infantry files through the devastated village, crosses a bridge and takes a narrow, dirt road that winds over green, rolling hills. Only the drift of the wounded, limping and littered to the rear, shows that the war lies ahead.

"Where the lines?" asks Waglith of a soldier, arm in a bloody sling, who passes rearwards.

"Over in them woods," and he flings his good arm behind him, where thickly wooded hills roll up to the horizon.

"Any o' you guys who're goin' to th' rear got a pack o' cigarettes, er th' makin's?" asks O'Connors of a litter bearer.

"Sack o' Bull, that's th' best I c'n do fer you," one answers and tosses O'Connors the package. He catches it neatly in mid-air.

"Tanks."

A great distance overhead, the solid blue of the sky is broken by tiny puffs of white smoke that open out about airplanes barely visible to the infantry. It can hear only faintly the whirr of motors, the

riveting of machine-guns and the mild "pow" of the anti-aircraft shells.

At a crossroads, beside a bare, iron crucifix and within sight of the church spire and sun-drenched roofs of a peasant hamlet, the column halts. The Captain comes along.

"Jackson," the Last Squad hears him say, as he points ahead, "do you see that wood? We're going to attack through it, north-northwest. Send one man out of each squad forward as line of scouts, an' a sergeant with a compass on the left to keep 'em moving due NNW. The Company'll form line of platoon columns and advance as the scouts strike the woods. When we hit the woods, we'll go into line of half-platoon columns. An' we'll keep going until we're stopped. All right?"

"Yes, Sir," Jackson answers, and in the same breath begins calling out the name of one man in each squad.

"Waglith," he says, as he reaches the end of the Platoon.

"Just th' right man fer th' job," comments O'Connors. "Fer he's got a long nose."

Nowhere exists any sign of the enemy as the thin line of scouts, rifles at the ready, slowly crosses the open and disappears, with a slight rustle, into the edge of the woods. The platoon columns advance silently, penetrate into the woods with a crackle of

underbrush, and break into line of half-platoon columns. Up the wooded slope, the scouts and columns go in silence save for the crackle of dried twigs underfoot and the rustle of bodies against the foliage.

Just under the crest of the hill, the columns halt, while the scouts go on over the summit. Sergeant Bamberger creeps along on the extreme left of the line, in liaison with scouts of another battalion. Over his face, to hide its whiteness, he has hung an olive drab handkerchief, two holes cut out for his eyes. He holds an automatic pistol in his right hand. Next him creeps Waglith, with the tip of his long bayonet extended forward.

"Say, Waglith," says Bamberger, "skin up that tree an' have a look around."

Waglith hands Bamberger his rifle and quickly climbs a beech.

"Can't see a damned think but the damned hills," he calls down.

Unexpectedly, a burst of machine-gun bullets blazes the bark of the tree, just below his feet, and he comes down with a rush. Bamberger listens to the tapping of the gun, well ahead.

"God, this is like Indian warfare," he says, and muses for a moment. "How many hills could you see?"

"Three—four—maybe even more."

"Was the next hill close?"

"Yeah, an' low."

"That machine-gun sounded far off. They must be beyond. Go back to the Skipper an' tell him I think we can advance up the next hill without any trouble. Tell him about that one gun."

Waglith goes back bent low, crossing every path with a hop.

"Don't want 'em to snipe me again," he says.

Once, at sight of a gray figure crouched in a thicket, he throws his rifle to his shoulder. He lowers it as he sees that it is a German whom a shell-fragment has caught between the neck and the shoulder, causing him to sag open down to the waist.

When Waglith reaches the Captain, he blows his whistle for the advance of the half-platoon columns. As they descend the slope, the soldiers give up the alert. They sling rifles over shoulders, and smoke as they pick their way through the thick underbrush and among the trees. At the base of the next hill, comes the sound of troops approaching through the woods.

"Who's that comin'?" some one in the columns calls.

"Americans—mind yer eye!"

Soldiers appear among the trees.

"Jesus," says O'Connors. "Some guys've taken it into the'r heads to go to th' rear."

The Captain, who, with Jackson, is close to the Last Squad, calls out quickly: "What outfit's that?"

"First Battalion, 1012th Infantry, or what's left of us."

"Who's in charge?"

A man in helmet and slicker, indistinguishable from any of the others, speaks up:

"I am—Captain Caldwell."

He is pale, and his eyes glisten.

"There's a battalion of machine-guns up there," he says, loudly, nervously. "I've lost half my battalion. I can't do anything more. I've got to go back. The men started to the rear. You can't do anything up there. It's impossible. It's murder to try to go forward."

"Can't help that," Holloway answers. "My orders are to advance until I'm stopped. . . . But where the hell *are* all these machine-guns?"

"On top of the second hill beyond. We caught it as we started up the slope. I must've left a hundred dead and wounded up there."

"My God, man, you left wounded up there?"

"I had to—couldn't help it—the rest gave way and started to the rear. I had to follow."

"We'll get to 'em before dark. Is there a road—

or a trail—anywhere they can be evacuated on?"

"There's a wagon-trail over on the left, but it's badly enfiladed by machine-guns."

The pale, nervous Captain goes by, adding:

"Good luck—thank God I got out."

"Christ," says Holloway to Jackson, beside him. "That's a disgrace. That fellow's lost his nerve bad. We've got to get to those wounded before dark. We'll change formation now and plug on."

He blows his whistle, softly, and calls out:

"Form combat groups!"

The single columns break in two, the rear half of each coming up on line with the first half. The formation is now that of a rough line of columns of a squad each, with an interval of six to ten yards between each combat group.

Over the crest of the hill, bullets drone and swish and snap overhead. From beyond, comes the tapping of the guns.

"They're up there all right," says Gray.

"Guess that Skipper in command o' that battalion wuzn't so far wrong," says O'Connors. "But, at that, it wuz a scurvy trick to give way an' leave wounded up there—so's we gotta git there, instead."

The combat groups push on steadily. In a ravine, the groups ford a creek that flows by a batch of deserted, Boche huts and dugouts. They are constructed of concrete and timber.

"Jesus, he wuz in here to stay," remarks O'Connors. "An' lookit th' wagons. He must 'a' left a whole dam' supply train there." He indicates a long line of horseless wagons and carts stretched along a trail.

O'Connors heads one of the combat groups. Novelli files at his back, silent and with a cigarette glowing between his lips. Then Gray and behind him another squad.

"Say, Novelli," says Gray. "You'd better douse that glim. They'll be able to see that glow soon."

Novelli knocks the ember off the cigarette, and keeps the dead butt in his mouth.

Up the slope, bullets drone, swish and snap thickly.

"Clever bastards," says Gray. "When it's too dark to see any longer, the Boche uses bullets instead of his eyes."

As darkness seeps about the base of the trees and through the underbrush, the advancing groups come upon the other remnant of that battalion met an hour ago.

"My God, Mike, look at that!" Gray exclaims, pointing to an American and a German who lie dead, head to head, not more than a yard apart. The rifle of each is outstretched towards the other. "They must've each fired at the same second!"

Through the woods, a wounded man moans, and another calls out:

"Who's that comin'?"

"Americans, buddy, we're gonna look after you," O'Connors answers.

The Captain's whistle blows.

"Halt where you are and dig in for the night," is the command passed among the groups. "An' pass word forward for the scouts to fall back onto the main line."

"Jackson," says the Captain, as he appears through the woods. "Put some one in charge of your platoon and take over the job of rounding up all these wounded. Litter 'em back to those huts in the ravine. I've just gotten word Battalion Headquarters is established there and you'll find the Medical Officer alongside the Major."

"All right, Sir," and Jackson turns towards Sergeant Bamberger and the other scouts who dribble out of the woods ahead: "Bamby, take over the Platoon an' see that every one gets underground before he turns in. An' one man outa each squad on duty all th' time with a Chauchat."

"Right, Jack," and Bamberger looks around. "Get that, you guys?"

The Platoon casts packs and the soldiers take out entrenching tools.

"I'd like to have a dollar fer every hole I've dug already in this dam' war," says O'Connors, his broad

back bent over his tiny shovel. "How'd you like bein' a scout, Mose?"

"All right, only some Cherman took me for a bird when I was up in a tree an' came pretty near makin' me flutter down."

"It wuz yer beak, Mose, caused that misunderstandin', no doubt."

Through the dark woods sounds the mush and clink of entrenching tools against earth and stones. The sound decreases, gradually, as the soldiers wrap themselves in blankets in the grave-like holes and go off to sleep. The last sound they hear is the staccato tapping of the machine-guns—always clearer and louder at night—and the whisk of lead overhead.

In the Last Squad, only Waglith stays awake, lying quietly in his hole, Chauchat against his shoulder, and peers ahead into the darkness.

2

At dawn, there's a stir along the line of dug-in troops. Blankets and slickers are flapped aside and indistinct figures rise up through the woods and shiver with chill. Unshaven faces appear pale and hollow-eyed in the faint light.

Jackson moves between the holes of the Fourth Platoon.

"Open your iron rations but don't eat more'n a

quarter of 'em," he says. "An' mind me now, for we may be a lotta days in this woods yet without any fresh grub gettin' up to us."

The soldiers puncture the tops of cans of tinned beef with the point of a bayonet and use its blade as a can-opener. It is quiet in the woods now, and they sit on the edges of their holes, munch meat smeared on hard biscuits and wash it all down with swigs of water out of canteens.

"That's a helluva meal after twenty-four hours wit'out puttin' anythin' under th' belt, ain't it?" O'Connors asks the Squad.

Novelli grimaces and rubs his belly.

"Novelli, you ain't spoken to me since we got drunk in Contrisson."

"Too hard spik Ingliss."

"Oh, awright, have it yer own way, but you ain't very companionable."

"Ummm."

"Say, Mike," puts in Gray. "Could you use a beefsteak smothered in onions for breakfast to-day? An' go across the street afterwards for a shave, hair-cut an' a shampoo?"

"Fer Christ's sake, Corp, you're playin' wit' death —an' not from acrost th' way, either."

Jackson's voice interrupts the talk:

"Roll packs an' form up in combat groups. We're goin' forward again."

Then the Captain's whistle blows and the tiny columns wind across the top of the hill. With daylight, the machine-guns ahead begin to tap and bullets whine low, close over the crest of the hill.

"Hell, I'm gettin' tired of that music," says Gray.

"Right, Corp, it's gittin' dull. They've bin doin' that fer a day an' a night now an' they ain't got one of us yet."

"They'll have to do better'n that if they wanta win this war, eh?"

"Hell, they ain't gonna win no war. My idea's they're on th' run now."

The combat groups descend the slope into a new ravine, where lie more abandoned huts of timber and concrete. As they advance up the slope that stretches ahead, the drone and snap of bullets draws nearer. Under the crest of the hill, they whit-whit-whit dangerously close. On the left of the line, a soldier grunts suddenly, as he catches the impact of a bullet. Farther off, some one cries out:

"Goddam' it, they got me, th' sons o' bitches!"

Every soldier flops and hugs the ground.

"Hear that, Mike," says Gray, in a low voice. "They're not wastin' all their lead."

He looks beyond O'Connors, for Sergeant Jackson.

"Don't stop," the Sergeant calls forward from

where he lies on the ground. "Crawl forward. Gotta keep goin'."

The advance goes on, close to the ground. No one rises up now. The man at the head of each group crawls forward through the underbrush. When bullets clip twigs too close to him, he digs in. Those in rear crawl up successively and dig in while the leading man crawls forward again. For hours the erratic crawl through the thick woods goes on.

"It's lucky we ain't got anythin' in us er we'd sure git indigestion," says O'Connors, as he snakes up onto the line beside Waglith.

"Sure, Mike, but you know the Army always does the right think. It looks after us grand. It didn't give us nothink but our iron rations because it knew we had to do this belly work. You can't beat the Army."

"Awright, Mose, push on. Th' sooner we git there, th' sooner we'll eat—maybe."

The Captain crawls along in rear of the groups: "That's right, Jackson, infiltrate. It's slow, but it's the only way we'll ever get there."

By afternoon the crawling infantry is so close to the enemy that the bursts of machine-gun fire startle. Every time a gun sputters the soldiers jump and grovel into the ground.

"Each time one of those goddam things goes off,"

says Gray, "I feel like it's right over my head an' aimed directly at me."

The foliage is so dense, vision can penetrate only a man's length.

"Seems like we're up against a stone wall now," says Waglith.

"Lead wall, you mean," O'Connors corrects him.

"Looks to me like it was time to lay to and go easy," says Gray.

The four Squad mates lie a few yards apart, along a fairly even line. Gray turns around, looking for Jackson, and sees the Captain crawling towards the Sergeant.

"Jackson," he hears the Captain call quietly. "L Company's been badly cut up over on the right. Seems like from a machine-gun nest ahead of you. Battalion's sending up a tank to try to knock it out. It'll come up that wagon-trail beside you. Advance your platoon alongside it, but well under cover. If it knocks out that nest, occupy it. Don't lose any ground it may gain for us."

"All right, Sir," and then Jackson calls to the members of the Fourth Platoon that lie all about him through the woods. "Get that, you guys?"

Already, the clanking rumble of the tank sounds from rear. The soldiers crane necks along the ground to catch sight of the metal monster. It looks strange in the woods, as it lurches along the trail at about

the pace of a slow walk. Fire from its machine-gun spouts out from its turret.

"Jesus, what a terrible lookin' object," says O'Connors. "Even if it don't hurt no one, it oughta scare 'em away."

"All right, Squad," says Gray. "We'll crawl along behind it, in the woods. Don't get too near the trail, for the dam' thing's bound to draw a lot of fire down there."

The tank rumbles a few yards ahead of the line. Suddenly, it halts.

"What th' hell's he stoppin' for?" asks Jackson, who crawls close on the heels of the advancing line.

"Tire trouble, maybe, Sarge," says O'Connors, looking around over his shoulder.

With the clatter of the tank ended, the infantry hears the smack of bullets against its metal, and their whine as they ricochet off the smooth plates.

"Christ almighty!" O'Connors adds. "How'd you like to change a tire under that machine-gun fire!"

Awkwardly, the tank slews around on its axis and trundles rearwards.

"What's th' trouble?" Jackson shouts towards the driver's slit in front.

As it comes up on a line with the infantry, it halts again and a muffled voice comes out through the slit:

"Tank mine on th' road—can't negotiate that—fer Gawd's sake."

"Well, can you beat that!" Waglith exclaims. "Aren't they the clever bastards! Now who but a Cherman would've thought of puttink a mine right there where they needed it most?"

"A mine can stop a tank, but it's not supposed to stop th' goddam infantry," says O'Connors. "Oh, no, we're supposed t' move right along up."

"Hell," says Gray, with disappointment. "I thought that dam' thing would do us some good."

The tank disappears rearwards, and its clanking rumble dies away. With its rout, the enemy fire increases in intensity and some Minenwerfers lob through the air. They appear in the air indistinctly—as dark masses of movement. When they hit the ground, they explode with a deep, hollow plummp, and geyser up earth, stones, twigs and whining particles of metal.

"Jesus, but they're ugly things," says Gray. "What's comin' next, I wonder?"

Stokes mortars in rear of the infantry retaliate with thermite—liquid fire. The shells burst in the air and cast down bits of molten, flaming metal. Some falls short and sets fire to the woods in spots near the infantry. The soldiers curse as they crawl out of their holes to beat out the fires.

"What th' hell good's all that," O'Connors growls.

"Fer it'll be us'll hafta go forward in th' end."

"Maybe we've gotten where we're goink," says Waglith hopefully.

There is no further effort from the rear to push the line farther forward. The infantry takes advantage of the pause to dig in deeper where it lies, stretched irregularly across the summit of the hill.

At dusk, the Captain crawls by again.

"Jackson," he calls softly. "As soon as it's dark, send a detail back to the ravine for wire. Carry up as much as you can spare men for and string it out in front of your position, as far forward as you can get. It's vital we get some protection out in front, for by all the rules of the game, they'll counter-attack to-night . . . and there're rations back at Battalion, in the ravine, you can bring up."

"Hear that, Corp?" says O'Connors.

"Beefsteak an' onions, I guess," Waglith chirps.

"Shut up, you goddam sparrer, an' don't torment a man."

"Th' first two squads'll go back for th' wire an' rations," Jackson interrupts. "Th' third'll stay on th' line an' the last'll string wire. Gray, you'll be in charge of th' stringin'."

After dark, the work is begun. Gray leads off. The others follow, each soldier pushing his spool of wire along the ground ahead of him, as if it were

a shield for his body. Ten yards out forward, Gray halts the metal bundles. Carefully, they are unrolled and the wire strung from tree to tree. Then brush is cut and piled against the strands. They work quietly, stealthily and stop every few minutes to listen. Gray, who doesn't himself work, but stands, with rifle at the ready, every moment on guard, can hear the enemy.

"Guess he's stringin' wire on his own side of the fence," he thinks, as he listens to the sounds of digging and cutting, with occasionally a metallic tang, maybe thirty yards away through the woods.

Waglith is twisting one of the wire bundles around a tree close by.

"How's it going?" Gray whispers.

"All right—just about used up all my wire now," Waglith answers, and pauses.

Close by, they hear a whispering.

"What's that?" Gray asks tensely, in a low voice. "Any of the detail out there?"

"*Freund — freund* — am *freund — Kann ich komm'?*"

"Hsst, Waglith," Gray whispers. "There's one wants to come over. Tell him to come on."

"*Ja wohl,*" calls Waglith quietly. "*Komm' ruhig hierher—aber*—no monkey shines."

Gray and Waglith crouch towards the sound of a

body coming through the underbrush. They aim at the darkness where they expect the German to appear.

A blunt helmet looms up, and beneath it a dark bulk. Waglith halts him.

"I've got my rifle on you," he says in German. "So do as I say."

"*Ja wohl,*" the other answers eagerly.

"Put your hands in the air and come on . . . all right . . . now . . . march, straight ahead."

"Waglith," Gray calls in a whisper. "Tell him to take off his helmet, or some one on our line's likely to shoot—an' get you, too."

He hears guttural voices and the thud of the helmet against the ground. Then Waglith's voice, calling softly in English:

"Sergeant Jackson—Fourth Platoon! Sergeant Jackson—Fourth Platoon!"

"What's up?" comes Jackson's voice.

"Got one here—tell no one to shoot."

"All right—but got what?"

"Gotta Cherman."

"Good—come on," and the voices end in a confused mumble.

Gray moves quietly through the woods:

"All th' wire used up?"

"Yeah, Corp."

"All right, let's pull back."

Jackson moves along the line, bawling out a man here for not getting deep enough under ground and swearing at another for letting his Chauchat poke its muzzle into the earth instead of out forward.

"Some goddam people don't know how to take care of theirselves—they need nurses, not sergeants . . . What's that, Gray? Used up all th' wire? All right. Better turn in, but keep one man on a Chauchat all night."

Gray goes back to the Squad holes:

"Mike, take the first hitch on the Chauchat, then Novelli, me and Waglith."

"Right, Corp, but how'd Mose git that Dutchman? I'd like t've gotten him myself."

"He came over, meek as a lamb. All Mose did was to take him back," Gray answers.

"It's that long nose again, I guess, causes Mose to round 'em all up like that."

"Pipe down, O'Connors," Jackson calls.

The soldiers wrap themselves in blankets, slickers and shelter-halves, cuddle up in holes and go off to sleep.

In the Last Squad, only O'Connors stays awake, lying belly down in his hole, the butt of the Chauchat against his shoulder and its barrel trained up over the edge. Whenever there's a vestige of movement or noise out forward, he presses the trigger and the automatic clacks. In reply, the enemy retaliates with

a burst of the more precise riveting of Maxims. They fire blindly at each other.

"Hell," says O'Connors to himself. "A feller don't know what to do. If I don't fire, they may come over. An' if I fire, th' bastards send bullets back."

The two lines, lying close together in the dense woods, are nervous, fearful, uncertain of what the other intends . . .

Later, O'Connors calls softly:

"Joseffi, oh, Joseffi, my two hours're up . . . got yer shoulder agen it? Awright, th' pleasure's all yers. Wake th' Corp when yer through."

O'Connors pulls his head into his hole, kicks a couple of times, to adjust the covers over him, and mumbles: "God, this war's gittin' to be a habit . . ." and he falls asleep.

3

Six days later the infantry still stretches in an irregular line across the summit of the hill.

Only to-day, as dawn stirs the soldiers into consciousness, they sense a change about them. The density of life that surcharged the woods seems to have thinned out. Gray turns to Waglith, rising up out of his hole:

"Say, Mose, what's up? It's not the same place here to-day it was yesterday?"

"I think I know, Corp. I was on duty at the

Shooshay after midnight last night and I thought I heard the Chermans pullink out. I didn't say anythink because I didn't see any reason why we should lose a good night's sleep chust because those guys ofer there didn't wanta stick around any longer. . . . Listen? . . . No machine-guns, hear?"

"Guess you hit it, Mose," says Gray, as he listens.

Jackson's voice interrupts:

"I've just been back to Company Headquarters. Th' Boche've pulled out an' we're goin' forward in two waves o' skirmishers. Roll packs an' be ready to move out when th' Skipper pipes."

With rifles cocked and at the ready, the infantry advances in two thin lines, the rear wave in echelon behind the first at a distance of about twenty yards. Gray and Waglith are on the extreme left of the leading wave and form liaison with a squad out of another unit. They follow the trail which the tank took on its journey six days ago. It runs straight forward in the direction of the enemy lines. As they move along, cautiously, Gray, who is a few paces behind Waglith, calls out suddenly, fearfully:

"Waglith, for God's sake stop! Don't move an inch but look down!"

Waglith stops in his tracks. At his feet he sees a half-dozen tins, shaped like flat cigar boxes, coupled together with tarred wires and loosely camouflaged over with leaves. Slowly, carefully, he lifts one foot

and puts it down well beyond the tins. He follows, gently, with the other. Clear of the place, he grins back at Gray.

"Jesus, that's the mine that stopped the tank! Look, there's its tracks, where it slewed around and came back. Oh, Jesus, what mightn't that 'a' done to me! Fan me, Corp!"

Gray steps carefully about the mine, searching for a main cord which should lead off into the woods. He finds it and asks Waglith to bring up a couple of abandoned rifles. Beside the wire, and on either side of the tins, he sticks one of the rifles, bayonet down, as markers.

They go on, pick their way easily through their own wire and penetrate silently that strip of thick woods where none of them has yet trod. When they come upon another band of wire—the enemy's—it takes longer to find lanes through it. Beyond, they come upon some fresh graves—marked with the huge, blunt helmets of the Germans—abandoned fox-holes and dugouts. The round, corrugated humps of a group of elephant huts loom up ahead.

"Gray, put a bullet through each of those tin shanties," says Jackson, whose position is between the two waves.

The Corporal fires a shot through the tin of each of the four huts. The cracks of his rifle echo through the woods and they listen to the subsequent silence.

"Didn't seem to produce nothin'," says Jackson. "Guess we c'n go on in."

Gray and Waglith, side by side, approach one of the huts and enter. It is bare, except for three eggs, in a pan on a table.

"We'll chust confiscate them, Corp, and have a little fresh chow later on, huh?" He takes off his helmet and puts the eggs carefully inside.

"We'll divvy with you, Sarge," he adds, as he sees Jackson poke his head through the doorway.

O'Connors and Novelli are coming out of another shack.

"Don't look like there wuz any one 't home 'round here, Sarge," says O'Connors. "Guess they cleared out solid durin' th' night."

They go on forward through the deserted woods, littered with German rifles, abandoned equipment, light Maxims and long, tangled belts. Soon, the first wave emerges out on a macadam road.

"Say, Sergeant," Gray calls back, "I don't see any use o' keepin' this up. Looks to me like they're way ahead of us."

A whistle blows and the waves lay to along the road, every soldier careful to keep under cover along its edge. The Captain appears:

"Jackson," he says. "Runner's just come up from Battalion and says the Boche is miles ahead of

us. Form column o' files on each side of the road and fall out."

The soldiers flop carelessly along the road and lean against the support of their packs. They light cigarettes and talk. The enemy is gone. There is no shell-fire, no machine-gun fire. The sun rises above the trees and warms them. They sit up, fumble in packs, open cans of rations and eat. Waglith makes a tiny fire out of leaves and twigs. He produces three eggs out of his helmet, breaks them into his mess can and fries them.

"By God, Mose, I wuz wonderin' why you wuz goin' bare-headed to-day," says O'Connors. "Fer Christ's sake where'd you git them eggs from?"

"Laid 'em, natcherly."

"Is that big one wit' th' double yoke fer me, Mose?"

"Here you are." Waglith disregards O'Connors and looks towards Gray and Jackson. "Come an' get 'em. Th' sunny side's up."

"Say, Joseffi," O'Connors remarks, as the fresh food goes down other throats. "We'll hafta learn how these guys lay eggs wit'out any roosters around."

The Italian grins and spits:

"Plenty next time go back—I got money."

Finally, under cover of a point out ahead and flankers crashing through the woods on either side,

the columns move forward, slowly, along the road. They wind around road mines, shell-holes, gaping craters and obstructions of felled trees, carts, wagons and field pieces, wheels removed and heaped across the road.

"He won't stop us wit' that truck," says O'Connors, and Jackson answers quickly, sarcastically:

"Why dontcha use that big brain o' yours, O'Connors. D'you think th' infantry fights th' goddam war alone. What about th' artillery an' th' ambulances—an' th' chow carts? They don't interest you, do they?"

Deserters drift down the road, grin and tip their pancake caps to the infantry. Two young, blond Germans open metal cigarette cases and hold them out towards the columns. O'Connors veers out of file, takes one and nods at the donor:

"Tanks, Jerry," and he turns to his Squad mates: "Can't beat that. Kill you willin'ly yesterd'y an' give you a smoke to-day. Yer right, Mose, war's a queer business."

The dead lie unburied and the wounded unattended. Among the latter, propped against his pack on the side of the road, lies a German with his legs gone. With glazed eyes, he watches his enemy pass.

"Our Medical Officer'll be along soon," says Waglith in German, as he goes by. "He'll fix you up."

"Give 'im a cigarette, Mose," says O'Connors. "I'll do as well by them as they done fer me. Who's got a smoke in his face? Novelli, give th' guy that cigarette."

Novelli hands Waglith his lighted cigarette, and the latter puts it between the dying man's lips. It hangs there for a moment, then tumbles to the ground.

"He's gone," says Waglith, as he hastens forward to regain his place in the column.

Ahead, sounds the creak of vehicular traffic.

"Hear that," says Jackson to the columns that march on either side of him. "A troop o' calvary'd go big now. Those wagons can't be more'n a kilo ahead of us, by th' sound. A troop o' calvary c'd capture 'em easy."

The columns swing around a bend in the road. Bullets whip against the macadam and a machine-gun rivets out ahead. The columns belly against the edge of the forest and wind in and out among the trees.

"Huh-huh," says Jackson. "They're gettin' in some rear-guard action."

"Where'd you learn so much about war, anyhow?" asks Gray, looking around at the Sergeant.

"All over," he answers. "I've served three hitches in th' goddam Army."

So close on the heels of the enemy withdrawal, and

covered by point and flankers, the advance is slow. It is noon when the columns reach a crossroads where the timber ends and scrubby, hilly country appears. The Major, who crouches in a gully with his Adjutant, holds up his arm and halts the columns. The soldiers bunch up in the ditches and take cover along the edge of the forest.

Novelli and Waglith lean against the base of a tree, while Gray and O'Connors sprawl in a ditch.

"Well, we're out of th' woods, anyhow," remarks Gray, and looks out from the edge of the forest across the rolling hills.

O'Connors notices the Corporal's interest riveted upon something.

"What th' hell is it, Corp?"

"My God, Mike, what th' hell's goin' on out there! Look!"

He points towards a low, scrubby hill about a kilometer beyond the crossroads and on the right of the continuation of the road along which the infantry has just come. The hill is so situated that he and O'Connors can see two sides of it. Up these slopes thin lines of troops advance slowly towards the top. Gray and O'Connors can make out the motion of the soldiers' arms as they throw hand grenades at each other.

"My God!" O'Connors ejaculates. "Ain't those both Americans? There're th' Jerries—on that far-

ther hill, beyond—pullin' out in columns. See 'em, Corp!"

"Think you're dead right, Mike. What a crazy business."

"Some one must 'a' throw'd a monkey wrench in th' cogs. This war ain't goin' right at all to-day."

"All right, Jackson," comes the Captain's voice as he quits the Major and Adjutant in the gully. "We're goin' to occupy that hill—over there—on th' left."

"Send 'em across the road in bunches," the Major calls after him. "We don't want to show a whole battalion out in the open."

"All right, Sir," answers the Captain, who passes along to give his instructions to the other platoon commanders.

Under intermittent bursts of machine-gun fire, the groups dart across the road. They lean over and hunch themselves under packs as they climb the side of the scrubby hill, sentineled on the top by a lone, dead tree. A captain from one of the other companies crouches in shelter of its trunk and arranges the groups as they come to him:

"K and I Companies on the right of the tree, M and L on the left," he keeps calling out. "K and M on the line, I and L in support thirty yards in rear. . . . Christ, it's gettin' hotter here every minute," he adds and ducks as a machine-gun clatters

ahead. "For God's sake, dig in when you get in position."

The Fourth Platoon of M Company, with the Last Squad on its extreme left flank, finds itself among some bushes just above a sharp descent down to a road which stretches away bleakly, without a sign of life anywhere along it.

"Are we all here?" calls Gray, as he begins to dig in. "Waglith?"

"Yeah, Corp, I'm here, tryink to get lower every minnit." He is on the other side of a bush from the Corporal.

"O'Connors?"

"Right, Corp."

"Novelli?"

A grunt answers.

The machine-gun fire increases. The soldiers work fast to get under the surface of the ground.

"Seems to me they've put us in a dirty place here," says Gray. "I believe the Boche can see us, but where in Christ's name he is, we don't know."

"That's what he hurried away so fast fer," O'Connors calls from behind a bush. "To git hisself good an' hid an' then turn on us—th' bastards. Hell, now I wish I hadn't taken that cigarette off th' guy back there on th' road."

"You're too sentimental, Mike," Waglith calls. "That's why you've got a whore for a wife."

And all the time they dig.

The Captain crawls up and speaks to Jackson, lying a few yards behind the Fourth Platoon.

"Battalion's orders are to go forward." He makes no comment as he crawls away towards the Third Platoon.

"All right, Sir," Jackson calls after him, and adds to himself: "But I'll just bet not."

He rises slightly on one elbow, blows his whistle and motions forward with his arm as the squad leaders look around. Voices sound along the line—an angry hum of dissent.

Yet they obey. They crawl forward and attempt to get up off the ground. As each man rises up—ever so slightly—bullets cut off twigs among the bushes and the line clicks casualties. A burst of bullets carries away a jaw. A single bullet glances across a face, wipes out an eye and crashes out close to the temple. A mass of lead cuts through a chest, and the man goes down with a grunt.

"Just exactly what I thought," Jackson mutters to himself, as he watches the steady crawl of wounded towards the rear. "You can't be a dam' fool—even in war."

The line falls back into its original holes. The soldiers flatten themselves against the ground across the top of the scrubby hill, sentineled by the lone,

dead tree, while the enemy grazes machine-gun fire across it without cessation.

"Advance, hell, we'll be lucky if we can stay here," says Gray, grimly.

"Dam' right, Corp."

"An', Jees, didn't it happen sudden," Waglith adds. "There I was this mornink, cookink eggs in their faces, thinkink they were on the run. And now, all of a sudden, looks like they've got us chust where they want."

"God dam' it, there's a sausage balloon goin' up," says Gray. "Now wait an' see what comes." *

A kilometer away, a shell drones and bursts. Then another, a trifle closer. Steadily, like the tapping of an approaching cane, the bursts draw onto the hill. They swing onto the deserted road, then climb the hill in an even line until they register directly among the fox-holes, where the infantry cowers.

An airplane appears out of nowhere, dark against the sky, dips down so low that the big, black crosses on the under side of the wings show up clearly, and rakes the fox-holes with its machine-gun fire.

Thuck-thuck-thuck-thuck-thuck sound the bullets against the ground and human flesh.

"Oh, God!" a man cries out hysterically, and

* Captive balloons are the eyes of the artillery.

Gray, hearing it, draws himself up in a hump in his hole.

"God, oh, God, oh, God," he mutters into the ground. "What hellish fire!"

For there's no way of getting protection against that ghastly overhead fire. The flatter a man cringes against the ground, the larger the target he offers.

The sky lightens and the 'plane whirrs off towards the rear, where an Allied sausage balloon has just gone up. By the time it reaches the end of its cable, the German 'plane dives at it and a streak of fire goes through the air. Two black dots drift slowly down from the basket, while the bag takes fire and tumbles smoking to earth.

"Christ, but this's a dirty business," says O'Connors. "Everythin's agenst us to-day."

"Now do you understand what all that stuff piled on the road meant, O'Connors?" asks Jackson. "You don't hear a hell of a lot of artillery behind us, do you?"

"No, Sarge, now I understand," O'Connors answers. "An' here it comes agen."

They listen to the approaching crescendo of shell-fire. As the bursts reach the top of the hill, silently, they hope and pray and swear. One explodes close to Waglith's hole. When the smoke clears, he raises an eye up over the edge of his shelter and sees that the shell has flattened out a hole near by and thrown

its occupant, Gearson, from the sixth squad, out into the open. He lies there, dazed.

"Say, Corp, Gearson's busted up. Shall we try to get him back?"

"Yes, soon's this bit of shellin' stops."

A few more screams and bursts and it is over.

"Oh, Gearson, where you hit?" Gray calls.

"Dunno—can't feel anything—but my legs look funny."

Gray and Waglith emerge carefully out of their holes and crawl to the wounded man. Gray drags his shelter-half behind him, for there are no litters about. Bullets swish overhead and keep the two close against the ground.

"We'll try to drag him over the crest of the hill," Gray says. "An' then we can rise up a bit. We'll have some shelter there."

"Looks to me like his legs were both gone," Waglith says in an aside to the Corporal.

When they take Gearson by the shoulders, he cries out petulantly:

"Don't touch me—don't move me—it hurts. Leave me be—so long as I'm quiet I'm all right."

"My God, Gearson, you can't lie out here like that. You've got to let us try to get you back."

"What's th' use o' goin'—ba-ck . . ." His eyes glaze.

"No use, Waglith—back to our holes."

For a few minutes, Gearson stays quietly alive. Then he closes his eyes, opens his mouth and dies.

"You guys wanta go easy on that stuff," says Jackson out of his hole. "Every one's gotta look out for his own hide now, an' not risk gettin' it punctured tryin' to help some one who can't be helped. . . . An' for th' love o' Jesus," he adds, at sight of an officer who walks up from the rear and casually asks for Battalion Headquarters.

"Get down, you dam' fool, you'll be killed if you stand up like that!" Gray and Waglith call out together, without any thought of rank.

As they speak, the officer goes down, swinging about as he falls.

"My God, where am I?" he asks.

"You're on th' front line."

He crouches up, rises higher and light-red blood soaks through the arm of his blouse, runs over his bare hand and drips onto the ground.

"Keep low, for Christ's sake keep low," says some one as the officer goes rearwards, cupping the dripping blood foolishly in his good hand.

"What th' hell do you know about that?" asks Waglith, in astonishment. "Where d'you suppose he came from? Never saw him before."

"He was wearin' a Sam Browne," Jackson calls over. "Guess he came up to see th' war."

"Then he can't complain," Gray replies. "He

saw a lot of it quick—when that machine-gun hit him."

"God, there's fools everywhere."

"Say, Sarge," calls O'Connors. "How long you guess this's gonna last?"

"Oughta get better towards evenin', or else they'll come over and it'll end, one way or th' other," Jackson calls back.

"Where d'you think they are?" O'Connors asks. "I'm firin' my Shooshay out for'ard, but I don't believe I'm hittin' anythin' but bushes."

"This is a kinda double hill we're on. My idea's they're on that knob you can see. Aim through the bushes and get your fire down on that knob."

"That's where I been firink," says Waglith. He raises himself, a trifle, to draw his canteen from his belt for a drink. As he lifts his head, he hears a great ring against his helmet, feels a blow and the jerk of the strap under his chin. He tips his helmet off and touches the crown of his head. He looks at his fingers, covered with blood.

"Corp," he says. "Somethink hit me on the top of the head. I oughta be dead, I guess, but . . ."

Gray looks over—for the bush which hid them from each other earlier in the day has since been cut away by machine-gun fire—and sees Waglith's eyes change expression. A frantic fear appears in them —and his head slumps out of sight.

"Waglith—WAGLITH!" the Corporal calls.

He reaches his arm out of his hole, seizes Waglith's arm and shakes it. It is limp.

"Waglith," he calls again, but in a weak, futile voice now.

Gray lowers his face against the earth of his hole and sobs. The war is sawing on his nerves now.

"This's what they call heroic—back home," he cries into the ground. "An'—an'—an'—it's dirty, stinking murder—that's what it is—oh, God—Mose—right beside me like that—oh, God, it's awful."

A machine-gun goes rat-tat-tat-tat-tat, and the clear, concise, metallic note of it causes Gray to control himself. He raises his head to the top of his hole and calls:—

"Mike, Mose's flicked out."

"I know, Corp—saw it all—but be glad it wuzn't you, Corp—that's th' only way to look at it—that's what I'm sayin' to myself—glad it ain't me."

Gray leans over again, takes the Chauchat bipoded in front of Waglith's hole, and puts it in position before his own. Then he takes out his entrenching spade and throws earth in front of his hole, underneath the barrel of the automatic, as a kind of breastwork. As he finishes, he hears the whirr of an airplane. He twists around in his hole, so he can see overhead. The 'plane carries the red, white and blue

concentric circles of the Allies. It shoots the 3-star signal—Where are you?

"Quick, Gray," comes Jackson's voice. "Throw out your shelter-half!"

Gray stretches it out eagerly, and puts his shiny, aluminium mess can on top, so that it may show up more plainly against the dun of the ground.

"What's that mean, Sergeant?" Gray asks. "Are we goin' to get some support now?"

"Oughta, for Christ's sake," Jackson replies.

Anxiously, they wait for the 'plane to acknowledge.

"He sees—he sees!" calls Jackson, as the 'plane shoots out two stars, and flies off rearwards.

Gray follows its disappearance enviously.

"Lucky bird," he says. "He can go where he pleases. He'll sleep in a bed to-night, I'll bet."

He cringes quickly into his hole as shell-fire again howls and crashes down on top of the scrubby hill.

"Oh, God, is this goin' to go on forever?" he mutters into the earth.

A few yards away, separated by Waglith lying dead in his hole, O'Connors, too, cringes against the earth and mutters: "Th' sun's down now. Is it gonna go on ferever, fer Christ's sake?"

Beyond him, Novelli lies belly down, his rifle extending overtop, and smokes. The side of his shelter, on his right hand, is marked with many holes,

where he has pushed cigarette butts into the earth with his thumb. Whenever O'Connors asks for a fresh pan of Chauchat cartridges, the Italian draws it out of a musette, leans over and fastens it under O'Connors' automatic.

At the let-up, Lieutenant Hammond, the First Platoon commander, comes crawling along behind the line. He never raises his head at all, but keeps it sideways against the ground, because of the incessant machine-gun fire that grazes low over the top of the hill.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Jackson greets him, raising his head cautiously just above the level of his hole. "Where's th' Skipper. Ain't seen him for a long time."

"Got nicked—through the neck—lucky devil. How you makin' out here? I'm in command of the Company now."

"Not so good. Four knocked off an' eleven wounded so far. Can't move at all, or some one else gets it."

"Just like that along the whole line. Half the Company's knocked out, easy. All my runners're gone. Will you send a man back to Battalion for me, with a message? I'm going to tell the Major I don't think I can hold on here any longer, that I think we ought to withdraw under the crest of the hill. Is that your idea, too, Jackson?"

"Sure, it ain't worth it to stay here." Jackson calls over to Gray: "Come over here."

The Corporal crawls out of his hole and worms his way over to Jackson and the Lieutenant. The latter gives him the message.

"Thank God for that," he says, as he goes off rearwards on his belly.

Over the crest of the hill, he creeps on hands and knees, then crouches, for the bullets pass higher overhead.

"Where's Battalion Headquarters?" he asks of soldiers lying about in fox-holes.

"Straight back—in a big, squared-out shell-hole —'bout a hundred yards back."

He walks almost upright now. Only his head is ducked down between his shoulders.

"Battalion about here?" he asks again.

"Over there," some one answers out of a hole, and points to a square excavation.

Gray ducks into it and sees the Major and a group of officers talking together in the middle of the space. He hesitates to interrupt, so leans against the boughs laced around the sides of the enlarged shell-hole or mine-crater. He wipes the perspiration off his forehead. He feels weak, now, as he realizes that, for the moment, he's safe against the machine-gun fire.

"Major," he hears a deep voice say. "You will send your battalion forward."

"My God," Gray says to himself, and looks at the speaker. He sees the single, silver star of a Brigadier-General upon his shoulder.

"Sir," the Major answers. "I can't do it. We tried to go forward once to-day and couldn't. The machine-gun fire is too heavy and we've no support from any of the other arms."

The General turns to one of the company commanders: "Captain, will you take the battalion forward?"

"I can't, Sir."

"Why not?"

"I can't lead men into suicide."

"Huh!"

The General turns towards another captain: "And you?"

"My men won't go forward, Sir. Their nerve is gone. The dead are lying about them too thickly."

The General looks about him: "Is there any junior officer here who will volunteer to take this battalion forward?"

No one replies.

The Major, whose face is a fiery red, sees Gray: "What is it, Corporal?"

"Sir," Gray straightens up and salutes. "Lieutenant Hammond, in command of M Company since the Captain was wounded, says he doesn't believe he can hold his present position any longer. He asks

if he may withdraw under the crest of the hill."

"Sir, that's the report from the Front," says the Major, turning towards the Brigadier-General.

"All right," the latter snaps. "Your battalion will go to the rear in the morning—where it belongs." He turns abruptly, climbs out of the hole and goes off rearwards. His Adjutant, a Major, hastens after.

The blush fades out of the cheeks of the Battalion Commander and he smiles wanly at his officers.

"That'll cost me my job, all right," Gray hears him say. "But I don't see what else I could've done."

"There wasn't anything else to do, Major," one of the other officers answers. "You saw what we did."

The Major again turns towards Gray:

"Tell Lieutenant Hammond to try to hold where he is. If the fire doesn't slacken by night, fall back on a line along here. . . . And that holds for you, too," he adds, looking at the officers grouped around him.

Gray salutes and quits the hole. He gets back to the line—walking, crouching, creeping, crawling—and reports to Lieutenant Hammond. He crawls up behind the officer, his body tight against the ground, and speaks breathlessly:

". . . an', Lieutenant, I heard the Brigadier say we'd go to the rear in the morning."

"Thank God for that . . . Say, Gray, I wish you could've brought that Brigadier along with you up here. Why the hell didn't *he* offer to take the Battalion forward? Swell chance!"

Gray starts to crawl away.

"Say, Gray," the Lieutenant calls. "Tell Jackson we'll stick it out here for another half-hour. If the shelling and machine-gun fire is just as bad by six-thirty, then we edge back. Understand?"

"Yeah," and Gray crawls on.

As he regains the Platoon and delivers the Lieutenant's message, he asks Jackson: "Is it any better yet?"

"There's been no shellin' since you left an' seems like th' machine-gun fire's lighter. Looks like maybe they've pulled out that battery an' 're beginning to withdraw all along th' line."

"God, I hope so," and Gray crawls into his hole. When he gets his breath back, he calls out to O'Connors:

"You ought've been there, Mike. The Major wouldn't send us forward, an' none of the others would take us forward. The Brigadier went back in an awful huff. It sure was a scene."

"Good fer th' Old Man. Dam' nonsense to try to go agenst those machine-guns. Dam' sight better fall back under th' hill now. Christ, you can't win any goddam war by gittin' every one knocked off."

Gradually, it quiets down across the top of the scrubby hill. The steady, uninterrupted tapping of machine-guns is ended. Now, come only occasional bursts of fire. Along the line, the soldiers no longer await with expectant dread the whine and burst of the first ominous shell.

"Mike," says Gray. "I'm pretty near all in. Let's organize here so's we can get some sleep. We better spread out a bit. You move over to that shell-hole where Gearson lies. I'll take the first hitch. Then I'll wake you. After your two hours, wake Novelli, and 'change places with him or else give him your Chauchat. Whoever's awake's got to be on an automatic."

"Right, Corp," and Gray hears O'Connors rolling away through the dark bushes.

"You fixed all right?" the Corporal calls.

"Gittin' fixed."

"Soon's you're fixed, turn in."

"Right, Corp."

"Novelli, d'you get what I said to O'Connors?"

The Italian mumbles assent.

It is chilly, now, with the sun down, and Gray trembles. He wraps his blanket and shelter-half around him. When that fails to keep him warm, he raises his head out of his hole and looks about him. Gearson's body, lying a few yards away rearwards, appears indistinct in the dusk, but Gray remembers

that he wore no pack. He looks towards Waglith's hole and sees a corner of a blanket that some one apparently threw over the body during the afternoon. He stretches out his hand, seizes the corner and pulls it towards him. He can feel it catching on Waglith's stiff body.

"It can't keep him warm," he says to himself.

He bundles up in his hole, shoves his shoulder against the butt of the Chauchat and peers ahead, into the dark. At every sound or stir out forward, he opens fire. In two hours he calls O'Connors. . . .

He awakes, feeling that no real time has elapsed since he called O'Connors.

"Corprul—Corprul," it is Novelli's voice which woke him, and Gray realizes it is his watch again.

"Awright," he answers sleepily. He puts his shoulder against the Chauchat. He trembles with cold and fear. As he hears a noise out forward, he presses the trigger and, as the automatic ceases fire, he nods to sleep and sees, outlined in huge, red letters against the night, the words:

RELIEF? IN THE MORNING?

4

One at a time, out of a thick, white mist, fresh troops file up over the top of the scrubby hill. They

wear overcoats and carry full packs. Slung over shoulders on a twine, or stuck over fixed bayonets, they carry round loaves of bread.

"Come to, you guys," they call out. "Come to, we're th' relief."

"An' where're th' Dutchmen?" they ask with a swagger of the miserable soldiers who shiver awake against the cold earth and limp about on numb feet.

"Everywhere," they answer. Yet they notice it is quiet now, with the tautness and tenseness of yesterday gone.

"Christ," they mutter. "Th' Boche must 'a' pulled out overnight an' now these babies won't get a taste o' nothin'."

"You'll find Jerry soon enough," one answers. "Or he'll find you. Don't worry, soldier."

"Well, we're ready. Let him come on."

"Sounds like this wuz yer first trip up?"

"You hit it."

"You'll git enough fightin', don't fret. It may be quiet now, an' agen it may be all hell in another couple o' hours. That's th' way it goes. . . . Jesus, that dough looks good. Could you spare a fellow a chunk?"

"Sure thing. Here you are," and one of the fresh soldiers breaks off a piece of bread.

Sometimes, one of the relief shouts to a soldier to wake up and join those who dribble across the

hill to the rear. The soldier lies in his hole—like Waglith—and when he's tapped with a foot, he's rigid. The live soldier draws back quickly:

"Jesus, there has bin a war on here. Will we hafta bury these guys?"

The old infantry straggles back across the scrubby hill, through the chill, autumnal dawn. Hoarfrost lies white over the slopes and through the hollows. Along the road, the soldiers form up into a lean column of files. Equipment is bare. They never had any overcoats, while blankets, slickers and shelter-halves went into the war—as litters for the wounded, and shrouds for the dead.

As the sun rises, dissipating the white mist, the hoarfrost and drawing the chill stiffness out of the soldiers' bodies, voices come forth:

"Where th' hell're th' cookers? We ain't had a hot meal in ten days."

"Are we gonna rest now?"

"In a pig's pink pyjamas."

"Not 'til th' goddam war's over."

"Trucks agen, o' course, but not 'til we've walked a couple o' days—just to keep their tires from wearin' out."

"Sure, don't matter about our feet."

"Hell, no, they'll grow agen, but rubber tires won't. You gotta buy 'em."

"You think those trucks have rubber tires? They're cast iron."

"Feels like it, awright, when you're inside."

"Christ," says O'Connors. "I'm gonna miss Mose. Who th' hell'll I sling th' foul wit' now?"

VI

Towards sunset, the remnant of the Fourth Platoon crowds into a camion, stows equipment forward and hangs over the tailboard while it waits for the long column to get under way.

"Where'd they get those monkeys from?" asks some one as he sees the sallow, Annamite drivers. "How'll we tell 'em where we wanta go?"

"You don't hafta do no tellin'. You're in th' Army now."

A touring car passes, with a French officer on its back seat. The groups of Orientals along the side of the road break up. Each driver tucks himself up on the seat of his camion. The column lurches forward, each camion getting under way a moment after the other, like a long train of freight cars.

"Home, James! Where d'you think we're goin', anyhow?" asks some one in the Fourth Platoon.

"Dunno an' don't give a dam', so long's we're goin' away from th' shells an' th' Jerries," O'Connors answers.

The camion bumps and jolts, swings and flaps, through twilight and darkness. It is guided by the

camion ahead, as it guides the one behind, each maintaining its proper distance in the camion column.

Its inmates try to lie down on the joggling floor over the springless chassis. But bones grind into the hard boards. They stand until feet and legs ache, squat until joints cramp and sit until buttocks are sore.

"God, this ain't any pleasure," O'Connors complains. "Are we gonna keep this up all night? Why in Christ's name can't we ever move by day?"

Gray is looking over the tailboard. Through the darkness, the glare of the Front shows up clearly.

"Say, Mike," he says. "I been watching that for a while now an' it doesn't go away. Seems like we're following the dam' Front. Think they could be taking us up onto another sector?"

"Wouldn't put it past 'em, Corp," O'Connors answers. "We'll see billets agen when th' war's over, I guess, an' not much before."

"Hell, there's a limit to what a fellow can stand."

"Not in this war, there ain't supposed to be. This goddam war's fer machines, not men."

As the hours go on and the camion jolts through the night, exhausted, they fall asleep, sitting on packs and huddled against each other for warmth, comfort and support . . .

They 'wake as the camion lurches and halts. It is still night and rain drips through the canvas cover overhead. A helmeted head appears over the edge of the tailboard and the soldiers inside the camion hear Sergeant Jackson's disgruntled voice:

"Pile out, Fourth Platoon. We're here."

"Where th' hell's that, Sarge?" asks O'Connors. "This another Front er we gonna billet here?"

"Orders are to debus—that's all I know."

A chain grates as some one kicks down the tailboard. The soldiers lower themselves stiffly onto the road, drag packs behind and worm into them. They group behind each truck, lean on rifles and shiver —until an order comes down the line:

"Unroll packs an' turn in—over in that field on the right of the road."

"Holy, jumpin' Jesus! Ain't that a helluva way to treat a man—make him bunk out in an open field in th' rain just after comin' back from th' line?" O'Connors shouts. "Say, Sarge, ain't ther' a town anywhere aroun' here?"

"Lieutenant says his map shows a burg a couple o' kilometers ahead. Says he thinks it's badly busted up an' there's no one livin' there."

"Can't be any worse than out here. I'm willin' to walk a couple o' kilos to git outa this rain. Who's comin'? Novelli? Corp?"

"Wait a shake," says Jackson. "I'll bring th'

whole Platoon along. I don't wanta bunk down in th' rain any more'n you do." He raises his voice: "All right, Fourth Platoon, pull it together an' follow me."

They slog along the muddy road, through the rain, out of habit marching in an approximate column of twos. They are heavy with sleep and bodies ache with the fatigue of the rough ride.

"There never wuz a war like this, Corp," O'Connors offers.

Gray is too tired to answer—until he sees the dark outline of a disheveled village ahead.

"There it is, thank God, but it don't look like much."

Feet strike cobbles.

"Christ, what a helluva lookin' joint," says O'Connors. "An' there ain't a soul alive 'round here, looks like."

"Where d'you suppose we are, Sergeant?" Gray asks. "Think we're near the Front?"

"Not so very near, judgin' by th' Lieutenant's map. I figure we're up behind a quiet sector an' this town's been under shell-fire th' whole four years o' th' war."

"It's dirty enough, God knows," says Gray, as they grope through gaping doorways into dark, wrecked houses. "It's piled up with cast-off equipment, rotten food . . ."

"And . . . s——t" O'Connors adds. But, at that, it's gonna be a dam' sight better'n outside in th' rain."

"How about here?" the Corporal asks, as he opens a creaking door and sees a large fire-place before him. "Looks like a kitchen. There's some straw on the floor an' it seems pretty dry."

"It'll do," says Jackson.

Equipment and rifles clatter against the stone floor. They toss the straw about to fashion some kind of beds for themselves. Then silence, until out of the dark sound snores and the long, heavy respirations of sleep. . . .

2

Under a gray, rainy sky, the Corporal, Novelli and O'Connors search hungrily and futilely through the abandoned village.

"Jesus, don't we look a sight," says Gray, as they shamble along in discouragement.

They are unshaven and pale. They came out of the kitchen legginless, with shoestrings untied, and with the mud and filth of war caked over breeches and shoes.

"I may look a sight, Corp, but I feel a dam' sight worse," says O'Connors. "I'm gittin' sick, an' if

I don't git somepin to eat quick, I'm gonna git sicker. My belly's all twisted up. When we hit th' cookers yesterd'y it'd bin so long since my belly'd seen grub I couldn't eat a square meal."

"How long you think it'll be before the cookers get up?"

"Hell, they're comin' 'long behind th' trucks. It'll take 'em another twenty-four hours easy."

"An' until then we starve, huh?"

"Right, Corp. That's about th' lay o' th' land, fer I don't see any chances o' findin' food aroun' here . . . Fer th' love o' . . . Say! What's that? Ain't that a ration dump—over against that house? Fer God's sake, come on!" O'Connors breaks into a run.

"That's a ration dump, sure enough," says O'Connors, arms akimbo as he stands and looks at the pile of boxes, cans and burlap sacks. When he sees how the rain has soaked through the latter, he adds: "Ain't that a God dam' way to treat good bread. Christ, th' infantry's treated worse over here'n I ever saw animals treated back home."

"Guess one of the trucks must've dumped that here early to-day," says Gray. "Let's hit it."

Novelli already has two boxes broken open. He lifts a box up to the height of his shoulders and drops it. Then he picks what cans he wants out

of the contents that strew about. O'Connors swings a sack of bread over his back and Gray takes a tub of butter.

"Say, Mike, we'll be fixed if we can get that fire-place going," says Gray as they splatter back towards the kitchen.

"I'll make 'er go, Corp. I onct worked fer a plumber an' heater."

O'Connors clears the refuse out of the fire-place and kindles a fire, using as fuel bits of the kitchen floor. He and Novelli make up a mess for the entire Platoon, utilizing the tin containers as pots and pans.

"Come on, you hungry horde," he shouts, when the beans are hot and the coffee has boiled.

Gray hacks bread with his bayonet and doles out smears of butter with its point. The Platoon files by the fire-place, sits on the floor and eats.

Along the corridor outside the kitchen door sounds the tread of boots and the tinkle of spur chains. O'Connors looks up with a spoonful of beans halted on the way to his mouth.

"You the fellows rifled that ration dump down the other end of town, ain't you?" an officer calls sharply from the doorway.

"Yessir," O'Connors answers. "Yer quite right, Captain."

"Well, what'n hell'd you do it for? That food don't belong to you—belongs to the 1046th Machine-

gun Battalion. It's to-night's mess for those men up on the line—an' here you fellows back in the rear steal food off men up front. What kind of a way's that to act, anyhow?"

"We understood that dump was left for us, Sir," says Gray.

"Well, you understood all wrong. Who's in charge of you men?"

When Jackson fails to speak, O'Connors understands and replies:

"Our Lootenant ain't around. Guess he's got other quarters—better quarters, maybe."

"Where's the rest of the rations you've stole?"

"There ain't any more, Sir," O'Connors replies. "Sorry, Sir, but they're all eaten."

The Captain glares around the kitchen, at the soldiers squatting on the floor, silent, with mess pans in laps, waiting for him to leave before they resume eating.

"There's some people'd steal Christ off the Cross an' go back for the nails!" The Captain leaves the door open behind him and stamps down the corridor.

"That's not so bad," says O'Connors. "Never heard that before."

"Shut that door, some one," says Jackson. "An' ain't it a good thing sergeants don't wear no chevrons in this war. If I'd had to gotten up he'd sure seen this cache o' food I'm sittin' on."

After mess, Gray and O'Connors sit on the steps

of the billet and look out at the dreary, destroyed village. Unkempt soldiers move disconsolately along its single street.

"Guess no one but us located that ration dump," says O'Connors. "Those guys look hungry."

"Look sick, too," says Gray. "I never saw a sorrier-looking bunch. Look! There goes an ambulance. Guess there *are* a lotta sick."

"Belly trouble from th' wet an' th' cold an' becuz there's no grub. That ration dump just saved me, that's sure. An' I guess those machine-gunners won't miss it any more'n I'd a-missed it if I hadn't got it."

Sergeant Jackson comes out the door, carrying the remainder of the rations.

"Where you goin' wit' them, Sarge?" O'Connors asks.

"The Lieutenant's requisitioned 'em."

"Oh, hell."

The sun sets invisibly and it darkens.

"Well, might's well turn in," says Gray. "Might just as well get all the sleep we can—while we can."

"Right, Corp, we'll hit th' dirty hay again."

Early in the night, they are awakened by a voice at the window: "Sergeant Jackson there?"

"Yeah . . . oh, Sarge . . . there's a goddam runner er some one here askin' fer you."

"What th' hell's th' matter?" asks Jackson, sleepily.

"Lieutenant's orders are to roll full packs an' be ready t' move out in fifteen minutes. There's trucks waitin' t' take us up to th' lines. Ain't that nice? Oh, what a helluva dirty goddam war we've gotten into."

The voice at the window leaves. Jackson gets his equipment together and goes out, saying:

"Hurry it up, Platoon, I've got to see th' Lieutenant."

Some of the soldiers begin to roll packs, but Gray, Novelli and O'Connors lie still until they hear whistles and voices out on the street:

"All right, M Company—shake it up—trucks're waiting."

"Shake it up, hell," O'Connors complains. "I'm goddam sick o' shakin' it up."

"Come on, Mike," says Gray, rising on his knees and fumbling in the dark for his pack. "Come on. Better go. We'll dam' well starve if we don't go."

"By God, Corp, yer right. We've gotta go." He and Novelli join the others who gather up equipment and bundle themselves out onto the street, where the Fourth Platoon falls in on the left of the Company front.

"Squads right—Marr-ch!"

The squads swing about and form a column that

heads off through the dark, deserted village. The soldiers slog silently through the drizzle. The only sound comes from the feet squelching in the paste over the surface of the macadam. A few kilometers beyond the village, the column halts and waits. It is so wet, no one falls out and flops. They stand in column, lean on rifles and wait.

"Where th' hell're th' trucks?" The question passes up and down the line.

After a quarter of an hour, the answer comes along:

"No trucks—been a mix-up—orders are go back to Jouy."

"That right, Mac?" Lieutenant Hammond calls to the Battalion Adjutant, who passes by along the road.

"Yep."

The Lieutenant curves his palms around his mouth:

"M Company—squads rightabout—Marr-ch!"

Feet squelch in the paste as the squads execute a complete semi-circle. Curses mingle with the steady slog as the column heads back towards the village.

"Well, I'm glad enough not to spend the night in a truck," says Gray.

"Yeah, Corp, but I'd a-bin just as pleased not to've bin waked up at all. What th' hell way's this to run an Army, anyhow?"

The Fourth Platoon bunks down again in the foul straw spread over the floor of the dilapidated kitchen. And again, towards daylight, the soldiers are awakened by a voice at the window:

"Sergeant Jackson there?"

"Yeah . . . oh, Sarge . . . here's another goddam runner askin' fer you!" O'Connors sleeps under the window.

"Well, what th' hell is it now?" Jackson's voice complains.

"Th' same goddam business—full packs an' be ready to move out in fifteen minutes—trucks're waitin' to take us up to th' lines . . . so they say, th' bastards who're runnin' this goddam war."

"For th' love o' Jesus!" Jackson swears. "Th' hell with my stripes! Th' hell with th' war! I'm damned if I'll order any one outa this kitchen a second time to-night!"

"That's talkin', Sarge."

"We'll stay right here."

"My feet're sore—I can't hike again to-night."

"An' I've got th' diarrhœa somethin' terrible—I'm weak—I can't go out in th' rain again to-night."

"Yeah, but what're you gonna eat if you stay here?" O'Connors asks.

"Jesus, that's so, an' that ration dump wuz moved off by truck last evenin'—saw it go."

"What'll we do, Sarge?"

"Aw, hell," Jackson says bitterly. "You can't buck th' Army. Come on. Let's go. We go or we starve." His voice changes, reassumes its habitual note of certainty and authority: "If there's any one here sick enough to stay, I'll see the Lieutenant. He'll have the Medical Officer send ambulances up in th' mornin'. But no gold brickin' now, mind!"

3

Novelli, with the butt of a cigarette between his lips, sits on an overturned butter tub before a piano. He bends forward and back rhythmically as he reads the notes of a German music sheet by the light of a candle melted onto the top of the piano. The Fourth Platoon leans across his shoulder and sings:

"Ein Rheinisches Mädchen bei Rheinischem Wein,
Dass muss—ja—der Him-mel auf Erden sein."

Then *Die Wacht am Rhein, Deutschland über Alles,* and on through the batch of sheets, until the last one is played.

"Jesus," says O'Connors, as he straightens up. "If th' people back home c'd hear us now, they'd put us in a concentration camp fer enemy aliens sure thing . . . How th' hell'd you come to play the piano so good, anyhow, Joseffi?"

"Movie house—back in States."

"Movies, oh, boy!" exclaims Gray. "How I'd like to step out to the movies to-night!" He becomes pensive for a moment. "Say, Mike, d'you ever expect to get into a suit of clothes an' be a free man again?"

"It's bad luck to look ahead in this life, Corp."

"God, I'd like to be back in Chillicothe to-night."

"You said a mouthful, Corp. I'll admit this goddam war's gittin' tiresome."

"If it doesn't end soon, there's none of us going to get back."

"Right, Corp, there wuz eight of us began wit' this hon'r'ble squad, an' there's just three of us left now, after four mont's of it. Three killed an' two gone to th' rear. That's th' score now."

"It kind of gets you now an' then, don't it?"

"Yeah, it does, Corp, but it ain't so bad down in this dugout. Nothin' c'n hurt us here. I had to laugh las' night when those bombin' aireoplanes come over. I listened to 'em dronin' regular an' rhythmic-like up there, an' then come th' bombs—wang-wang-wang. But they can't touch us down here. Feller's safe enough so long's he c'n stop down in this dugout. But I don't like them big shells Jerry sends over now an' again. I ain't bin out to take th' air fer three days. Every time I go up an' twist my beak aroun' that gas curtain I hear one o' them big

bastards comin'. When it explodes, sounds like th' whole dam' town wuz fallin' down."

"But I can't sleep for the flies an' the cooties," says Gray. "The flies run races across my face all night an' the cooties across my belly."

"Read yer shirt, Corp."

"Hell, haven't you seen me reading it morning, noon an' night. Guess I can't keep up with the birth-rate."

"That's because they're German lice, Gray," Jackson puts in. "Th' Dutchmen'd been up here four years before th' Marines took the place off 'em last month in th' Saint-Mihiel drive."

"You're too tender, Corp," O'Connors says. "They don't bother me 'cuz my hide's tough. . . . But at that, Corp, you ain't the boy you wuz when I first laid eyes on you at Camp Upton, just before we sailed fer this dam' country. You wuz meek an' mild. You've growd up since then."

"Fella's gotta grow up in a war like this," says Jackson.

Novelli sits on his wooden butter tub and smokes, with his back to the piano and his elbows on the keys. The rest of the Platoon is sprawled on mattresses spread over the cellar floor. At the head of each, a rifle or Chauchat leans against the wall, with equipment and rations piled alongside. Refuse is littered abundantly across the flagstones.

"Must've been a Boche P.C. here," says Gray, as he leans out from his mattress and rummages idly through the papers. "There's a lot of Boche junk lying about."

A colored postcard catches his eye. He picks it up and looks at it.

"What's this?" he exclaims. "Say, look at that!" and he hands the card to the Sergeant.

"What th' hell? Looks like a picture of German prisoners used as stokers in an open hearth, with French guards whippin' 'em on!"

"Let's see it, Sarge?" O'Connors asks. He looks at it attentively.

"Made in Germany," he says. "What th' hell do they know about it? I'll bet that's a lot o' hooey. That's just propaganda put out by th' German big-wigs to keep th' Jerries from comin' over to th' Frogs. I'll bet they put out th' same kinda dirty stuff 'bout us. We've taken a good many prisoners an' I ain't seen one yet wuzn't treated as good as any of us git treated—admittin' that ain't too good."

"There's a lotta bull handed out," says some one else, as O'Connors passes the card along. "Ain't no doubt about that."

"There's a lotta goats in this war," O'Connors goes on. "On both sides o' th' lines. We're told just what they wanta tell us, an' it's th' same wit' th' Jerries, I'll bet. Mose wuz a wise kid. He didn't

believe nothin'. He had to be shown. I talked wit' him about it. He knew th' Germans, too, fer all o' him that wuzn't kike wuz German."

"Uh-huh," Gray interrupts. "It's funny. The whole business looks different when you get close up. I argued with Waglith about the atrocity stuff once, but I'm willing to admit, now, he was right. Back in the States I believed anything, but I'm damned if I do any more. I don't believe there's so much atrocity stuff goes on. An' remember that 'Kamerad' business we used to be told about? Has any one seen any of that?"

"Like hell we have," Jackson answers. "Some of 'em've come over, sure, but I've lost count of all th' dead ones I've seen lyin' by their machine-guns. I don't wanta run up against any better soldiers."

"It's all bull," says O'Connors. "'Specially the atrocity stuff. . . . Any o' you know that tall, blond guy in L Company they call Slim? Didya hear his story? He wuz captured up in Fismes after he'd bin hit in th' arm by machine-guns. Th' Jerries took him down in their Dressin' Station, an' some Jerry searched through Slim's pockets fer papers o' military importance—as he told Slim—an' found a photo of Slim's wife an' two kids. Th' Jerry took everythin' else away but give Slim back that photo. Now I call that white enough fer any man. Six mont's ago I'd expected th' Jerry to spit on th'

photo. Now I know that's only what a guy'd read. I've wised up a lot in this war. A man don't act that way, that's all there is to it."

"How'd you hear the story?" Gray asks. "If Slim was taken prisoner?"

"From another guy in L Company, who got it from Slim. Th' Jerries left Slim down in that dug-out when they pulled out an' L Company found him there, 'long wit' a lot o' other of our prisoners."

"That's a good story," some one puts in.

"Story—hell," O'Connors answers quickly. "It's th' truth."

"I'm not denyin' it," the other replies.

"Th' way it shapes up to me is that this war's a lotta goddam foolishness," O'Connors continues. "What th' hell's it all about, anyhow? I ain't got nothin' against th' Germans, an' I guess they ain't got nothin' against me. An' yet we're doin' our best to kill each other. What th' hell's th' idea o' that? It ain't gonna git me nowhere if I kill one of 'em, nor him if he kills me. What th' hell good did it do whoever hit poor, little Mose in th' bean wit' that machine-gun bullet? He never knew if he killed any one er not? No one could see anything but bushes on that goddam hill. I'm not blood-thirsty, like Jim. He wuz looney."

"Did you hear that a D.S.C.'s come down for Marzulak?" Jackson asks.

"A helluva lotta good he'll git out of it," says some one. "Lyin' under th' sod up there in Fismes."

"Th' trouble is all this guff we read in th' papers's by guys who ain't bin near th' Front," O'Connors goes on. "How th' hell they git the'r dope, I don't know—make it up outa the'r heads I guess, fer it's all th' bunk. Th' trouble's all behind th' lines. It's th' people back home do all th' hatin' an' all th' talkin', an' leave it to us to do the'r goddam fightin'. An' th' only reason any of us do any fightin's becuz we hafta, ain't it? . . . But, Sarge, while we're talkin' now, there's a question I wanta ask? What th' hell wuz it kep' us from turnin' tail an' runnin' that last day we wuz on that scrubby hill—up there —where we wuz all gittin' knocked off?"

"I dunno, O'Connors," Jackson says.

"I've thought about that, Mike," Gray speaks up. "An' it seems to me it was just because no one was alone there. If I'd been alone there, I'd've gone away, quick. I'm sure of that. But no one wants to be the first to turn 'round. If some one had, I'll bet we'd all followed."

"Think you've hit it, Corp. It wuzn't because any one wanted to git killed that we stayed there, an' it wuzn't patriotism either. That's gone by th' boards now . . . Is ther' any one here who wants to go up to the Front to-night an' fight for his country? If so, let 'im step up here an' have his head

examined. . . ." He turns towards Novelli, who still sits on the overturned butter tub and patiently smokes. "Ain't I right, Joseffi?"

"Da war no dam good," the Italian nods.

"Yer right, Joseffi."

A clatter comes down the stairway, the gas curtain is brushed aside and a Company Runner blinks in the candlelight:

"Sergeant Jackson here?"

"What's up?"

"Lootenant's orders are roll full packs an' fall in on th' road outside at nine o'clock. An' shake it up, he says, fer there's another outfit comin' into town now to take over our dugouts."

O'Connors' voice brays out again:

"*Are* there any goddam patriots here who wanta go up to th' Front to-night? Again I ask it?"

It is moonlight upstairs. After the days and nights deep underground, the soldiers feel bare, exposed, naked, out in the open. They group close against the walls of the houses and wait nervously for the head of the column to pass.

"Why'd they bring us up so soon?" some one complains. "Th' looks o' this town gimme th' willies."

The town is silent, ghost-like. The faces of the gaunt houses that flank the cobbled street are blown out. Inside, the various floors are exposed to view like a child's doll's house. Furniture, clothes, bath-

tubs, pictures and crockery show in the moonlight.

"God," says Gray. "Isn't it queer to see a town that must've taken centuries to build busted to bits by a couple of days' shell-fire. Look what it does to the houses, the stone—an' yet we've got to stand up against it!"

The Lieutenant goes by at the head of the column:

"All right, Jackson, fall in on the tail of the Third Platoon."

With a metallic tang, the column kicks feet clear of telephone wires, twisted across the street and mixed up with abandoned military equipment and civilian clothes.

"Say, ain't that a petticoat?" says O'Connors, as he steps on a white skirt. "Say, th' Jerries must 'a' kep' a lotta wimmin up here wit' 'em."

"Why th' hell not—if you're gonna spend four years fightin' a war."

The column debouches out of the town into open country. Beside the white, macadam road a battery of 75's—its four guns spaced evenly in emplacements on the other side of the ditch—is about to go into action. The infantry can tell that by the way the artillerymen move quietly behind the breeches of the guns and coddle shells in their arms.

"Prepare for action!" an officer who stands on the far side of the road calls out.

Four times the command is repeated by ser-

geants who crouch beside the breech of each gun. Figures spring upon the pieces and behind each breech, a hand is held aloft.

"Fire!" calls the officer on the road.

The upraised arms come down and the guns crash in unison. Shells pass from arms to arms and into the open breeches. Successively, the guns fire salvos.

"That's a purty sight awright," O'Connors comments. "But why th' hell can't they shut up while we're on th' move. That'll bring th' Jerry batteries down on us—when th' artillery's safe in its goddam holes."

"That's th' hell of it," says Gray. "An' shells never hit what they're aimed at."

"But there's always plenty o' infantry around fer th' shells to hit."

"God help the infantry in this war."

"What's that? I don't see Him doin' much for us either."

The staccato barks of the 75's cease. It leaves a silence across the bare country. Far away, on either side of the road, tiny lights shine fitfully, like fireflies.* Ahead, over the dark splotch of a village, the illuminated arcs of star shells appear. A tension stiffens the column. It goes on expectantly. Now it comes—the whine of a shell. From head to rear, along the single file, soldiers duck successively to-

* The aiming points of the artillery.

wards the ditch, and straighten up as the whine ends in a burst.

"Ain't that a dirty shame!" says O'Connors. "It's th' goddam artillery makes all th' trouble fer us."

Another shell whines, and bursts in the village ahead. No halt is called. The column goes on towards the bursts. With a mechanical, seemingly inhuman persistency, it passes through the village over a cobbled street, while shells screech and burst through the houses and in the outlying fields.

Whe-e-e-e-bang—whe-e-e-e-bang—whe-e-e-e-bang

Timbers and mortar slide within the houses and bits of flying metal hum and whine through the air.

"Where's God now?" O'Connors looks around over his shoulder at the file in his rear.

"He ain't home to-night."

Beyond the village, the sickly light of the flickering flares appears closer, over the top of a low line of even hills.

"Guess that's the Front, up there on those hills," says Gray. "Looks quiet, anyhow."

The column files by a graveyard, among some bushes and slowly climbs a slope. Close to the top, a voice comes out of the moonlight:

"That th' relief?"

"You hit it, buddy, we're comin' up so's you guys c'n go back an' take a good, long rest—in a pig's pink hind-end . . . guess you're bein' relieved so

you c'n join a big drive somewhere," O'Connors replies.

"What th' hell're you talkin' about? Ain't it time we had a rest after two weeks in these lousy trenches?"

Ahead, running along the summit of the hill, appears a thin, dark line. The incoming infantry files along behind it.

"Shake it up," they say. "We wanta get in there before Jerry opens up. He may get nervous again."

The outgoing infantry begins to crawl out, cautiously. Every time a flare goes up and bursts, the files duck and hold still. Quietly, they talk.

"What's it like up here? Quiet, ain't it?"

"'Cept fer a little shellin' at times an' patrollin' at night. There's plenty o' that to do."

"Where's Fritz?"

"'Bout a kilo away—over on that next line o' hills."

"Had many casualties?"

"Only on patrols—half-a-dozen outa th' Company, maybe, durin' th' two weeks."

"Not so bad."

"No, if *you* ain't th' casualty, it's not so bad."

A flare goes up, some bullets pss-pss-pss overhead and a machine-gun rivets. A shell screams towards the trench, and dies with a dull thud.

"Dud, praise Jesus," says some one.

Immediately, another shell screams, and bursts just short of the trench. Simultaneously, the two lines—the outgoing and the incoming infantry—throw themselves into the trench. For some minutes all seems inextricable confusion. Gradually, when no more shells come over, the two lines disengage.

"Good luck," says a file, as the last of the outgoing infantry disappears rearwards.

"So long," answers a file out of the trench. "An' take a coinyak fer me."

The infantry shakes down in the trench. Quietly, orders are passed along:

"One man out of each squad on the alert all night—two hour shifts—and a half-hour before dawn every man-jack's gotta stand to."

"Novelli, take the first hitch," says the Corporal. "Mike, you an' I'll turn in."

"Right, Corp," O'Connors says. "But I've gotta have a smoke 'fore I sleep. Who's gotta cigarette?"

He sees the glow of an ember under Novelli's helmet.

"Th' Eyetalian, o' course. Say, Joseffi, how in hell do you work it. You're allus smokin' a cigarette, yet you allus have plenty? You give birth to 'em? Like Mose did to them eggs up in th' forest? Poor little Mose . . . that's a good feller. Thanks. Now I'm fixed."

He lights the cigarette off Novelli's ember, un-

rolls his pack and bunks down, lengthwise, along the bottom of the trench.

"Let's sleep double, Mike," says Gray. "We'll keep warmer. It's getting damned chilly these late October nights."

"Right, Corp, but promise you won't go down on me . . . but, hell, you don't understand that talk, do you?"

The Corporal is already asleep.

Novelli has bipoded O'Connors' Chauchat forward over the parapet, opened the musette full of extra pans and laid it to one side. His own rifle is propped against the forward wall of the trench. He leans against the rear wall. From time to time he straightens up and looks out forward, across the parapet. Afterwards, he sinks back, and tips his helmet across his face so that its rim hides the glow of his cigarette. Patiently, he awaits the elapse of two hours.

The moon is down, but the stars shine, obliterated momentarily every time an enemy flare goes up, bursts and flickers towards the ground. Occasionally, a machine-gun taps.

4

"Ten dam' days we bin up here now," says O'Connors, busy among his teeth with a sharpened match

stick. "It's gittin' tiresome an' th' shells're beginnin' to git on my nerves."

At dusk, after a supper of bread and hot slum, served out of a marmite can carried up to the Front by the ration detail, the three Squad mates sit in the narrow trench, backs propped against its rear wall.

"An' th' cooties crawl faster an' thicker over me every day," O'Connors goes on. "My O.D.'s three mont's old now. I'm ready to go back an' git deloused."

"Relief ought to come any night now," the Corporal says. "An' I'm hoping it'll come before it's our turn to go out on night patrol again."

"It's not that I mind so much as th' shells, Corp. That mornin' an' evenin' straffin' that comes over so regular's gittin' my nanny fer fair. I'm beginnin' to jump every time I hear th' wheeze o' one o' them goddam G.I. cans."

"It's the machine-guns, though, that're doing the damage in this war," Gray replies. "Why don't they give us more M.G.'s? These old Chauchats aren't so bad, but you can't compare 'em with the light Maxims over across the way."

"Well, Corp, th' way I figure it is you might just as well scare a guy to death as kill him, an' scare 'im pie-eyed's what th' shells do. . . . Whadda you say, Joseffi?"

"Dam sicka war," the Italian grunts.

"Yer dam' right, Joseffi, so gimme a cigarette on th' strength of it."

Novelli draws a single cigarette out of his blouse pocket and hands it to O'Connors.

"Didya ever see anything like him fer cigarettes, Corp? They must grow on 'im."

Sergeant Jackson appears, coming along the trench, and the three Squad mates draw legs up under them to let him pass.

"What's up, Sarge?" O'Connors asks. "You look like you was goin' somewhere? We gonna be relieved to-night?"

"Dunno, only th' Lieutenant's sent for me."

Creases form across Gray's forehead. They remain there while the Corporal awaits Jackson's reappearance along the trench.

"All right, Gray," he hears him call. "Lieutenant's orders are to send out a three-man patrol, an' it's your turn. It's tough, but I can't help it."

"All right, Sergeant . . . Come on, Mike, Novelli, get ready."

"Th' Lieutenant says Regimental's asked him to find out if the enemy has any machine-guns out in front of his line," Jackson continues. "Go out an' wander around a bit, an' if you draw any fire try to locate where it comes from."

"All right, Sergeant."

The three soldiers detach haversacks from car-

tridge belts, buckle on the latter, look to cartridge clips and rifles, and put on helmets overtop of over-seas caps.

"Better wait a little, Sergeant, hadn't we? It's pretty light yet."

"I leave it to you, Gray, push off when you're ready."

Nervously, they move up and down the short, clear space of trench line. On either side of the area that belongs to the Last Squad, soldiers squat, smoke and talk.

"We wuz out last night," says a soldier on the left. "It wuz a cinch. Wuzn't nothin' stirrin' out there."

"An' you'll go out to-morrer night," says O'Connors, resentfully, turning towards the right.

"Aw, why wish a guy hard luck? You sound like you're glad we'll hafta go."

Gray looks up at the clear sky. Stars are beginning to twinkle on. Then he looks out forward, across the parapet. It darkens rapidly, out there among the scrubby bushes.

"Let's go," he says. "An' get it over with."

"Come on, Joseffi," says O'Connors.

They climb up over the parapet and crawl over the ground until they get under cover of the bushes. There, they rise and go forward cautiously, rifles at the ready.

"We'll go as far as the ravine," Gray whispers. "Head up it an' come around back that way. That'll make close to a mile patrol, an' if nothing shoots at us in that time, we'll report there aren't any machine-guns out here. Seems goddam foolishness to me, anyhow, to come out here an' try to get shot at. That's not sense."

"Right, Corp," O'Connors whispers in reply. "I feel like I'd bin shot at enough already in this goddam war."

They go in file, O'Connors in the lead, Novelli next and Gray in rear. They twist neatly in and out of the bushes, careful to avoid rustling the leaves that are already crisp with autumn.

From time to time, the arc of a star-shell goes up ahead. Before the flare bursts, they crouch stock-still, and remain motionless as the light floats down. Through the darkness that succeeds, they go on quickly.

Ahead, a machine-gun rivets. O'Connors stops.

"Go on, Mike," Gray whispers. "That's 'way off, on the Boche front, or beyond."

They reach the ravine Gray indicated, veer to the left and follow the bed of a dry stream.

"Ssst, Mike," Gray whispers. "I don't like it along here. May get in for enfilading fire. Better pull off into the bushes up there, across the way."

"Awright." O'Connors crosses the dry streambed

and disappears quietly into the bushes that fringe its farther side.

Novelli, about to follow, steps on a stone that gives. His foot comes down with a grating noise of hobs against the gravel.

"Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat," sounds a machine-gun, so close they catch the action of its metal parts.

Novelli goes down with a grunt. Gray flops flat against the ground.

"You all right?" he whispers.

"No."

"Are you hit?"

"Yes."

"Mike," Gray calls softly. "Don't go 'way. Novelli's hit."

He crawls forward, slowly, into the streambed towards Novelli. He reaches out and touches Novelli on the arm.

"Where you hit?"

"Chest—hurta bad."

O'Connors peers out from the fringe of bushes. A burst of machine-gun fire passes overhead and thuds into the ground.

"Don't show yourself, Mike," the Corporal whispers. "They must see us. Stay where you are, but don't go 'way."

A burst of fire passes overhead and thuds into the ground beyond. A second cuts through the

bushes behind Gray, and a third switches over behind O'Connors. The fire forms an invisible cage of lead. The three soldiers lie motionless and silent inside it.

"They're closing in on us, the bastards," Gray says to himself. "Got to get out of here quick, somehow. Lucky there's bushes between us an' those flares."

"Mike," he calls softly. "You there?"

"Yeah."

"Stand ready to grab Novelli. I'll bring him to you."

"Awright."

Gray worms his head and shoulders under Novelli's body.

"I know it hurts," he says, as the wounded man grunts. "But if you make a noise we'll never get out of here."

He crouches to his feet, raising Novelli and holding him across his back and shoulders. He springs toward O'Connors and hits the bushes with a crash. O'Connors seizes Novelli and holds him in an embrace. Machine-guns clatter behind them.

"Quick, Mike," says Gray. "Make a seat—with our hands—Novelli, hug our necks with your arms—we've got to run for it, or we're goners—head for that bend and cross the streambed under cover of the hill—that's our only chance."

They crash through the bushes. They can hear the clacking of the machine-guns, but the sound of

the bullets is lost in the noise they make among the bushes.

"They've not got us yet," Gray says through clenched teeth. "In a minute we'll be around that bend an' in defiladed space."

Around the bend, they emerge from the bushes, cross the streambed, penetrate the bushes on the other side and pause. They can hear the machine-guns, but the sound is duller, for there is a hill between them.

"Christ, Corp, that wuz tough goin'!" O'Connors pants. He turns to Novelli, resting partly on the ground and partly against their joined arms: "How're you, Joseffi?"

The Italian grunts.

"Jesus, Corp, you handled that all right. I couldn't think o' nothin' to do. If you hadn't told me somethin', I'd bin back there yet."

"Can you walk?" Gray asks Novelli.

"Mebbe—try."

With his arms around their necks, he walks slowly.

"That's good," says Gray. "If you can keep that up, we'll be back in a jiffy."

Even so, it is a long, painful way back to the lines. They are obliged to halt frequently to let Novelli slip back against the ground and rest.

"Is he bleedin' bad, Corp?"

"There's a lot of blood soaked out over his chest.

There's no way we can stop it here. Sooner we get him back the better, that's all."

"Let's try it out again."

They raise Novelli, who grunts. He is weaker now, so that they must hold his arms around their necks.

"Patrol coming in!" Gray calls as they near the lines. "Watch out—don't shoot—patrol from M Company coming in!"

"Awright, come on," a voice answers from ahead.

"Got a litter?" Gray calls. "Got a badly wounded man here."

They hear the sentry pass the word down the line:

"Litter wanted up here!"

"What company?" Gray asks, as they reach the parapet.

"L Company—where you from?"

"M—that litter come along yet?"

"Shake it up wid dat litter," the sentry calls again. "Dere's a man dyin' up here. . . . Christ, dose litter bearers're slower'n hell. . . . Too bad, buddy, where'd you git it?"

Novelli, lying along the parapet, grunts. Gray answers for him:

"Machine-gun through the chest. Looks like he's hurt bad. . . . All right, here's the litter. Now you'll be all right, Novelli. It'll be a soft trip back to the Dressing Station on this."

"Ain't there a First Aid Man here to give him a bit o' 'tention?" asks O'Connors.

"Not wid dis company, dere ain't. Dey're all back in de villidge in de Dressin' Station."

"Come on, Mike," says Gray. "Better get him right on back . . . Say, sentry, can you get word over to M Company—to Sergeant Jackson—that Novelli got busted up an' we've gone back to Battalion Dressing Station with him?"

"I'm standin' to—I can't go, but I'll wake my buddy an' he'll take de message over. . . . Hey, Mac," he calls towards a bundle lying along the bottom of the trench. "Come to, got a job fer you."

The bundle stirs and a face appears.

"Say, Mac, go over to M Company an' find Sergeant . . . what's his name?"

"Jackson, acting Lieutenant in command of the Fourth Platoon of M Company."

"Mac, find Sergeant Jackson, actin' Lootenant, Fourth Platoon, M Company, an' tell him . . . what?"

"That Corporal Gray'll report in an hour. That's enough."

". . . that Corp'rul Gray'll report in an hour. Get that, Mac? . . . Awright, Corp'rul, you kin count on us to get dat over."

"Come on, Mike, let's get Novelli back."

The Italian lies quietly on the litter. As Gray and O'Connors lift it, he asks for a cigarette.

"In a few minutes, Novelli," Gray answers. "Soon's we get under the crest of the hill. Don't wanta get picked off now, after all we've been through already to-night."

As soon as they are hidden from the enemy lines, they put down the litter.

"In pocket," says Novelli.

O'Connors finds a package of cigarettes in Novelli's blouse pocket. He lights one and puts it between Novelli's lips. He fixes another for Gray, takes one himself and returns the package.

"Awright now?" he asks.

"Ummm," Novelli grunts appreciatively.

They proceed again, the two forward handles of the litter resting on O'Connors' shoulders and the two latter on Gray's. They go slowly, along a path that winds across the side of the slope, past the cemetery and on into the village.

"Where's th' Battalion Dressin' Station?" O'Connors asks a shape skulking in the shadow of the empty houses.

"Over there—see the sign?" The shape points.

They head towards a wooden board, painted with a Red Cross, nailed over the entrance to a dugout, reënforced overhead by a huge mass of logs.

The interior is lighted by candles melted on a long

table, piled with bandages, forceps and pails of antiseptic lotions. Beside it, a Medical Officer sits on a box, asleep, with his head pillowed on his arms folded over the table. Another talks over a telephone.

"What've you got there?" the latter asks, interrupting his conversation and cupping his hand over the mouth-piece. As he turns 'round, his eyes show red and bleary with lack of sleep.

"Machine-gun through the chest," Gray answers. "He needs attention—been two hours or longer since he got hit."

He and O'Connors lay the litter on the floor.

"All right," says the Medical Officer. He turns back to the telephone: "Another chest case just came in. Better send up two ambulances. That makes a total of six cases waiting now. All right. Good-by."

"You still alive?" O'Connors asks Novelli.

"*Si, si,* notta gonna die—goddam!"

"That's talkin', Joseffi."

The Medical Officer at the table sleeps on while the other quits the telephone, kneels beside Novelli and examines his chest. He cuts the bloody clothes away from over the wound, stuffs wet cloths over the gaping spot, dry cotton on top of that, and ties Novelli's blouse over all, with bits of string.

"That'll hold him 'til he gets back to the Evacuation Hospital," he says, as if to himself.

Gray and O'Connors watch him bare Novelli's belly and inject something under the skin with a hypodermic needle.

"That's the anti-tetanus," he says, aware of the others' interest.

"Will he pull through?" asks Gray.

"Oh, I guess so, but we can't ever tell. We can't do anything much up here. All that's got to wait 'til he gets back to the Evacuation Hospital. . . . You fellows must've had a time with him. How'd he get hit?"

"On patrol—out between the lines," Gray answers. "He slipped, made a noise against a stone an' the Boche opened up. Lucky we got out at all. It looked dam' close for a while."

"Dam' tootin'," O'Connors adds.

"There's some coffee on that stove, if you boys want a cup before you go back?"

"Sure do, Lootenant, thanks," says O'Connors, going towards the tiny black stove, with a pot of coffee and a pan of boiling water on top.

"C'n our buddy have a drink, too?" he asks, indicating Novelli, prone on the litter, his chest bulging with bandages.

"Sure, if he wants it."

"Joseffi, want coffee?"

"*Si, si!*"

"What's that he says?" asks the officer.

"He's an Eyetalian—don't talk much English. We've bin buddies fer six mont's now an' he don't say a dozen words a mont' to any of us."

They take their tin cups off canteens, hanging on cartridge belts, and pour into them as much coffee as they dare. O'Connors raises Novelli up, so he can drink. The movement hurts him and he quickly lies back again.

"Mike," he says. "Take cigarettes. Plenty cigarettes where I go."

"Yer a good guy, Joseffi," says O'Connors, as he rummages through the Italian's blouse pockets. He takes out a half-dozen packages of Omar cigarettes.

"Say, they must be th' same cigarettes we found up there in Death Valley. How'd they las' you so long, Novelli?"

"Got Anderson's."

"What you know 'bout that, Corp? Th' Eyetalian must 'a' salvaged poor old Shorty's pack after he got bumped off up there in th' Woods. Now th' mystery's solved."

O'Connors lights one, puts it between Novelli's lips and pockets the packages.

"Thanks, Joseffi, yer awright an' I hope you pull through."

Among the patients, lined in litters along the wall, one speaks in a strange language.

"Say, ain't that Dutch?" O'Connors asks the Medical Officer.

"Yes, he's a German—got shot while he was trying to give himself up. He wants to say something to us all the time, but we can't understand him."

"Too bad Mose ain't here, Corp," and O'Connors turns back to the Medical Officer. "We had a buddy in th' Squad could speak German better'n English, but th' Jerries made th' mistake o' knockin' him off up in th' Argonne."

"Come on, Mike," says Gray. "We've got to get back. Jackson won't know what the hell's become of us."

"Awright, Corp . . . So long, Joseffi, you'll come along."

"So long, Novelli," the Corporal adds, and squeezes Novelli's hand. "Thanks for the coffee, Lieutenant. Good night, Sir."

Out on the village street, it appears dark after the candlelight inside the dugout. They hear voices and the sound of many feet before they can make out a column winding through the village.

"Hello, what's this?" Gray exclaims.

"What outfit?" asks O'Connors. "An' where th' hell're you goin'?"

"1007th Infantry. Goin' up to take over th' lines."

"Oh, Jesus, Corp, that's our relief!" O'Connors says jubilantly. "But ain't that dam' tough fer th' Eyetalian to git busted up like that jus' th' night we go back?"

They walk along beside the column of files, conversing quietly.

"Foist time up fer us," says one of the files. "What's it like up there?"

"Quiet enough," O'Connors answers. "Nothin' to bother you. A little shellin' mornin' an' evenin', but otherwise it's jake. We bin up here ten days now an' only had two casualties in our Platoon—one man killed by shell-fire an' our buddy hit by machine-gun to-night, out on patrol. We just lef' him back in th' Battalion Dressin' Station."

"Hurt bad, wuz he?"

"Yeah, purty bad—caught about six bullets through th' chest."

"You hafta go out on patrol often?"

"Every night some one's gotta go out from th' Company, but th' squads take turn about. Yer not likely to go out more'n onct er twict."

"How far off 're th' Germans?"

"Oh, 'bout a kilo, but the'r patrols an' machine-guns work up closer durin' th' nights."

"How long you bin over?"

"Since early Spring. When'd you land?"

"July. We stayed wit' th' English a long time. We don't like them bastards."

"Ner we. We trained wit' 'em after we first come over. But we bin in a helluva lot o' scraps since then."

"Yeah? What you bin through?"

"Th' Marne, th' Vesle, th' Argonne an' now here. There ain't so many of us left now."

"How many casualties you had in yer squad?"

"Hell, there's only th' two of us left now."

"Hear that, Bill? All knocked off but two out'n his squad!" the file calls to the one preceding him.

"Aw, not all of us bin knocked off. One couldn't stand th' gaff an' went to th' rear, an' another wuz an S.I.W., an' Novelli, th' guy we just took back, wuz only wounded. Guess he'll pull through."

"Yeah, but that makes three killed, don't it? Purty heavy, strikes me?"

"Yeah, it's bin a helluva hard war so far."

"Feller don't have much chanct o' pullin' through in th' infantry, does he?"

"Not unless he gits a good wound, he don't."

"How long you think th' war's gonna last?"

"Th' Jerries're on th' run now, sure—not here, 'cuz this's a quiet sector—but all 'long th' line where we bin up to now."

"Think it'll end 'fore winter?"

"Christ, I hope so. I ain't lookin' forward to bein' up on th' line when th' cold comes."

The column halts.

"Gotta leave you now, an' git on up to our Company," says O'Connors. "So long, an' good luck. Hope you don't git knocked off this trip up."

"Thanks fer bein' so cheerful—so long."

"So long."

Gray and O'Connors pass by the files which flop as they await orders. They find their section of trench and meet Jackson, busy about the relief.

"Hello, you guys come back at last?" he says. "Heard one o' you got it. Which one was it? . . . Novelli? That's always th' way it is, O'Connors, isn't it? Th' best men always go first."

"That's awright. I'm willin' to be th' worst if it's gonna git me through th' war."

"Was he hurt bad?" Jackson asks.

"Pretty bad," says Gray. "Machine-gun through the chest, but the Doc said he thought he'd pull through."

"Was it a machine-gun out forward?"

"Yeah, I've got it located pretty fair, I think."

"Awright, Gray. See"—and the Sergeant points towards an officer standing near by—"there's th' Lieutenant who's takin' over our section o' trench. Tell him where you think it was."

Gray nods to the Lieutenant, takes him by the arm

and points out over the parapet. He explains the route of his patrol, indicates the dry streambed—where Novelli was hit—and where the machine-gun fire appeared to come from.

"Thanks, Corporal," says the Lieutenant. "We'll watch out for it."

"Is the relief completed up there?" Lieutenant Hammond's voice calls.

"Yes, Sir," Jackson calls back.

"All right, clear out of the trench!"

"Freeze whenever a flare goes up," Jackson warns the soldiers as they climb out of the trench rearwards. "We don't wanta start any dam' shellin' to-night—of all nights."

VII

"WHADDA you think o' these rumors, Corp?" O'Connors asks.

He and Gray, with Sergeant Jackson and the remnants of the Fourth Platoon, are living in one of a group of German huts in a patch of woods behind the Front.

"What've you heard?"

"What ain't I heard? Everythin'. Jus' met a clerk from Regimental says an order's bin issued all troops on th' line to be on th' look-out fer an automobile comin' through th' lines wit' German envoys o' peace. An' some one else says a Boche 'plane flew over here las' evenin' showin' a white panel. An' another guy says he heard all th' German submarines 're comin' in on th' surface, flyin' white flags. Hell, ther's no end o' th' armistice rumors."

"That first one—about the envoys—sounds good. Maybe it's true. Wouldn't surprise me. The Germans've sure been on the run for the last couple of months. We know that. I was talking to a fellow in L Company last night an' he said two of the prisoners came over to L Company last trip up predicted the war'd be over in a week, or ten days."

"I hope it's true, Corp, fer I've bin deloused now, got rid o' that three-mont's shirt an'm all ready to go home an' kiss my wife . . . like hell! I ain't had a letter from 'er since I bin over here. Whadda you know about that fer a dirty way to treat a feller, an' she gittin' one-third o' my pay each mont'? I guess I'll not bother wit' lookin' her up when I git back. I wouldn't mind gittin' hold of a French girl. They're good cooks an' they know a thing er two 'bout makin' love."

"What do you do for a living, Mike?"

"Anythin'—I've done everythin'—played professional baseball, football, 'tended bar, day laborin', wuz Second Mate, onct, on a Ohio River freighter—but I got drunk—served a turn in th' Navy—oh, I c'n do anythin', purty near."

"What'll you do when you get your discharge?"

"Try to git a job in a shipyard, I guess. From all I hear, those guys who stayed behind've bin makin' millions makin' ships . . . Whadda you do, Corp?"

"I'd just gotten out of high school when I joined up."

"Yeah? But you ain't like them two rah-rah boys —Allen an' Whittaker?"

"Hell, Mike, every one's not just the same 'cause they go to high school."

" 'Course not . . . but what're you gonna do fer a livin', Corp?"

"Dunno, maybe I'll go to college."

"So . . . that's what you'd better do, Corp. Education's a great thing. Look at me. That's th' trouble wit' me—I ain't got it. I've gotten a good time outa life, awright, but I ain't got nowhere so's you c'd notice it. . . . Yeah, Corp. You better go right on back to collidge an' learn to be somepin. Be a doc er a lawyer. They're th' guys that have it soft."

"Well, Mike," says Gray. "While the writing's good, I'm going to write a letter to my people." He rummages in his blouse pocket for some sheets of Y.M.C.A. note-paper and a pencil.

"Yer lucky agen, Corp, fer I ain't got no one to write to, 'cep' that dam' wife an' I wouldn't waste time writin' her on a bet. I got lots o' pals back in th' States, only I don't know where any o' 'em are now."

O'Connors squats in the middle of the floor, cross-legged. The Corporal sits on the edge of his crude bunk, constructed of unplaned wood and chicken wire, and puts his paper against the bottom of his mess can, supported by his knees.

"Dear Family [he writes] Well, we're back again for a little rest—in a woods—living in some little Boche shacks. It's not so bad, except for the dirt

and the rats that scoot all about the place at night. We've been here two days now and are just beginning to recuperate.

"Remember, we were in reserve when I wrote you last. Well, we moved up and relieved the battalion on the line, but things were pretty quiet. A bit of shelling—usually in the mornings and evenings—and some ticklish work on night patrols out in No Man's Land. One night—the night we were relieved to come back here—Novelli—he is the Italian I mentioned in my letters before because he never spoke to us—got pretty badly wounded. A lot of machine-gun bullets through the chest. Mike O'Connors and I got him back to the Dressing Station, though, and the doctor said he guessed he would pull through. Have I ever mentioned O'Connors? I forget. Well, he is a pretty tough guy, but he has a good heart and we're good pals. A fellow gets along with different kinds of people in the Army."

"What're you tellin' yer folks, Corp?" O'Connors interrupts.

"Oh, I'm just about to say I'm not likely to get under fire again an' expect to come back to 'em."

"That sounds good, Corp, but don't be too sure of it. I know th' goddam Army an' you c'n never count on nothin' so long's yer in it."

"Oh, hell, why be a gloom!"

"I ain't bein' a gloom, Corp," O'Connors answers with a natural aggressiveness. A pause, and he adds: "Maybe I am, Corp, fer it kinda hurts to see you writin' to yer folks like that. You know, it's bin a helluva time since I had any folks. Feller kinda misses folks when he's 'way off like this."

Gray goes on with his letter: ". . . Well, the big news with us now is about an armistice. All kinds of rumors are floating about. We don't know if they're true or not, but we're waiting, hoping and praying that orders may come to us any minute that all hostilities have ceased—fini la guerre! Oh, boy. I believe we may be home before long now. Maybe I am too optimistic. It may be all rumor and talk, yet I can't help feeling that it is coming and coming soon. The end of the war, I mean. . . ."

"What's that?" Sergeant Jackson's voice causes him to look up.

"Now jus' wait a minnit an' see who's bein' a gloom er not," says O'Connors. "You c'n bet yer ass that's orders to go back up agen." O'Connors' moment of tenderness is over.

"Full pack an' be ready to clear out in fifteen minnits," says a runner through the sashless, paneless window of the log shack.

"There you are, Corp. An' ain't that a goddam

dirty shame. Now I'll lose all th' good o' that delousin' I had this afternoon."

Gray folds his unfinished letter and puts it in his pocket.

"Won't send that yet," he says to himself, and to O'Connors: "Maybe we aren't going up, maybe it's farther to the rear. If those armistice rumors're true, that's more likely."

"Don't kid yerself, Corp, fer that ain't th' Army way. Th' Army gives you th' worst, allus."

Listlessly, the soldiers gather up belongings, roll packs, stack them outside the hut, and smoke while they await orders to fall in.

"How 'bout iron rations, Sarge?" some one asks.

"There's a dump alongside Company Headquarters. Take what you want."

A whistle blows, and the Lieutenant's voice follows: "M Company, fall in on the field, along the edge of the woods."

"Shake it up," the sergeants call.

Listlessly, the soldiers hunch into packs, straggle through the woods and fall in carelessly in Company front.

"Hurry it up! Hurry it up! We've gotta get going."

"Hurry it up, hell, that's all they know," O'Connors grates out, almost under his breath. "God dam' 'em all!"

"Squads right—Marrrch!"

"Left oblique—Marrrch!"

The Company is off, plodding slowly, heavily across the muddy field. When it strikes a macadam road, the soldiers shake and kick the heavy clods of mud off shoes and settle into the hike. As the column passes through a village, the enlisted personnel of Regimental Headquarters stands along the road and jibes:

"Watch out, you guys, they say there're bullets an' shells up where you're goin'. Th' war's purty near over—you don't wanta get knocked off now."

"Go back to yer holes, you goddam dugout soldiers," the column counters.

"We know how to fight th' war. What's th' good o' goin' up forward when you c'n stay back here?"

"Th' hell with you!"

Gray turns to O'Connors: "Don't Regimental move up, too?"

"Nope, I wuz talkin' wit' that clerk yesterd'y. That dam' gang stays right here, fourteen kilos back o' th' lines."

"God, they must live in clover."

"They sure do, Corp, but you hear what they say? We're goin' up awright. Those guys know. They're next to th' Old Man."

"Listens like it," Gray says, without any pleasure. "An' we've got to cover fourteen kilometers to-night

an' be given a nice, comfortable place on the Front at dawn. What a dirty business it is!"

A flamboyant sun sinks towards the edge of the western horizon. For a while, the column marches into the swath of the dying day. At a crossroads, it turns its back on the orange streaks and faces east, where clouds pile up in the sky. With the twilight, guns boom out ahead, and camouflage appears along the road.

"Column o' twos—right o' th' road!" comes the command, and the column of squads lengthens out.

The column is silent, up and down its dark, winding length. The only sound it makes is the shuffle of feet, and occasionally the jangle of equipment or the brush of cloth against cloth. It goes forward, halts, flops along the edge of the road, climbs onto its feet and goes forward again. It sticks to the road tenaciously, like a massive caterpillar. Inexorably, it goes forward into the war.

Later in the night, rain falls. The soldiers put on helmets over the light, overseas caps, unhitching the metal head-gear from the barrels of slung rifles. At the next halt, they take slickers out of packs and put them on under equipment. Now the rain-drops patter against the steel helmets and slickered shoulders. The incessant sound whips Gray's mind into an angry resentment.

"God damn it, Mike!" he says loudly, so that the files ahead look around in surprise. "Have you ever thought of what a hell's toll we've paid in this dirty war?"

"How d' you mean, Corp?" O'Connors walks on the Corporal's right.

"Leaving death an' wounds out of it—think of how many nights we've spent on the move, how many nights we've spent out in the rain, how many kilometers we've hoofed, how many meals we've missed. It's a stinking, dirty business, Mike, an' I'm fed up with it."

"So 'm I, Corp, but what're you gonna do about it?" O'Connors speaks calmly.

"Armistice—hell!" Gray goes on. "That's all bunk. I guess that rumor was fed us on purpose—just to buck us up for the winter. God, Mike, it's going to go on forever. There's only one way out—wound or death—an' I hope one of 'em comes soon—an' I don't give a dam' which it's going to be. I'm sick of it."

"Aw, don't talk that way, Corp. Keep yer head up."

"What the hell's the good, Mike? I feel like I've pretty near reached the end. I can't keep it up forever."

" 'Way to th' right!" The command leaps along from rear.

The column of twos bunches towards the side of the road, as the bulk of a truck lumbers by. It goes through the wet night darkly, and switches on headlights only at road turnings, fearful lest it draw down enemy artillery fire.

"Mike," Gray begins again. "What the hell is death, anyhow? Do you believe in anything afterwards?"

"Never took time off to think about that, Corp."

"I don't know what I think, only I feel now like I needed something to hang onto. . . . Wonder if it's just like sleep? An' you wake up again somewhere else? . . . I want to see my people again, Mike. I've got an awful nice sister."

"What's her name, Corp?"

"Susan."

"That's a purty name. Got a girl, too, Corp?"

"Hell, no."

Silence, save for the patter of rain and the slog of feet.

"You've lived a lot more'n I have, Mike. I don't feel like I've had any life yet, 'cepting for this war. Seems like everything's begun for me with this war."

"Yer right, Corp, it's just beginnin' fer you. Yer lucky."

"Yeah, if it don't end sudden."

"Hell, Corp, don't worry. It ain't goin' to. Th' Last Squad's had its share o' killed. I figure Joseffi's

changed our luck. We're due fer some nice, light wounds now. An' lookit all you bin through already? They ain't gonna git you now. Yer name ain't written on no Jerry bullet."

"Hope to Christ it isn't, Mike. An' I guess I didn't mean what I said a while ago. I don't want to die."

"'Course not, Corp."

Again silence, save for the patter of rain and the slog of feet.

Gray stumbles over an unevenness in the road. As he lifts his head, he seems to see indistinct shapes flitting through the night.

"God, guess my eyes're going back on me," he mumbles.

"What's that, Corp?"

"I'm pretty near all in, Mike."

"Shouldn't wonder. I ain't feelin' fresh myself. We'll be gittin' there soon now, sure."

Gray's head goes down again, fastened on the track before him. As he shuffles along, he nods off to sleep, coming awake every time his foot strikes an unevenness in the road.

"Never knew a fellow could sleep standing up an' walking," he says.

"It's hell, what-all a guy learns to do in this war," O'Connors replies. "Feller in civilian life never dreams he c'd do all we do over here. Seems like there's no limit to it all."

"I feel like there's a limit all right."

"Say, Corp, lemme sling yer gun over my shoulder. That'll make it easier for a bit. Dawn'll come soon, 'n' then it'll be better."

"Thanks, Mike, but you've got the Chauchat an' those pans. I'll make out."

Flares show up ahead, fogged by the rain. A command comes down the line:

"Column o' files—six paces between files!"

The march becomes sporadic, and the halts frequent. During the pauses, every one sleeps soundly, sprawled across the road, with helmets tipped across faces against the steady rain. When the command to go forward comes along, it fails to awake a couple of files. The column gets up irregularly and contact is lost. Here and there, the files double-time—under the load of pack and equipment—to catch up.

"God, it's awful," Gray pants, as he regains contact with the preceding file. "When d' you suppose dawn's gonna come, Mike?"

"Soon now, Corp—look there—see th' light—over them trees?" O'Connors puts his hand at the base of the back of the Corporal's neck and twists his head around.

"Thank God!" says Gray. "The worst's over now. Ever notice, Mike, it's always worst just before dawn?"

"Yeah, Corp, it's like th' ebb tide."

It brightens, perceptibly. The rain ceases and

the day comes steadily. Its light reveals a white, misty world. Loads lighten, legs swing easier and talk begins. Single words and jerky sentences pass up and down the column. Some one sees a 5-franc note in the mud of the road. He points it out to the file in rear.

"Whadda you want with five francs? Th' Jerries won't sell you nothin' with it."

No one stoops to pick it up. The rumors—the idea of an armistice—have been lost during the night.

The column passes through a village, files by a graveyard, among some scrubby bushes and slowly climbs a slope. Mud cakes on feet, doubling, quadrupling, the effort of lifting them up and putting them down. As the column reaches the narrow trench-line which zigzags across the top of the hill, the Lieutenant limps by. He holds his helmet in his hand. His hair is matted with sweat and his features are tortured into lines of fatigue.

"Get into the trench an' get some sleep," he says, at intervals, as he passes along. "Get all the sleep you can, as quick as you can."

"Hmmm," says O'Connors. "Th' Loot's feelin' th' strain. An' he sounds like he had somethin' on his mind, too. . . . Know where we are, Corp?"

The Corporal looks up as he shakes open his blanket:

"Hell, yes, we're back where we were."

2

The world overhead is white and misty as O'Connors awakes, stiff and cold, at the bottom of the trench. Without awaking Gray, who sleeps alongside, he pulls the Corporal's left arm out from under his blanket and looks at the watch fastened on his wrist.

"One p.m.," he says to himself, and sits up. "That wuzn't so bad fer a sleep."

He watches the Lieutenant approach along the trench, coming slowly as he steps over the prostrate bundles of sleeping soldiers.

"Sergeant Jackson around here?" he asks, as he sees O'Connors awake.

The latter points to a blanketed figure near by.

The Lieutenant taps with his foot the muddy soles of the shoes that protrude. The figure stirs and Jackson's face appears.

"Wha-a-a-t th' hell?" he says, confused. "Oh, Lieutenant, that you?"

"Listen, Jackson," O'Connors hears the Lieutenant say. "A Divisional order's just come down to me. It says the enemy's pulled out. We're to make a reconnaissance on the line across the way."

"Jesus—when do we go?"

"Soon's we can get off."

"Awright, I'll get th' men up."

"Just a minute," the Lieutenant continues. "We'll pull out of here in column of files and head for the edge of that woods, over on the left. Can't see it now, for the mist, but you remember it from last time, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"We'll form up in two waves of skirmishers there, an' go forward. An' if nothing happens, we'll grab a section of Jerry's trench an' sit tight."

"An' if somethin' does happen?"

"Christ Almighty, Jack, the Company's down to sixty-odd men. We can't attack the German front line in broad daylight with a platoon!"

"Meanin' we'll come back, huh?"

"That's it."

"What's th' idea, anyhow, d'you know? Does Division really think th' Dutchmen've hauled ass?" asks Jackson.

"Looks like it."

"What d'you think? Have they?"

"Don't know—it's a damned ticklish business."

"Dam' right it is."

The Lieutenant shakes his head nervously and goes off to another platoon. Jackson gets up and rouses the remnants of the Fourth Platoon.

"Come to—roll packs—we're movin' on," he calls.

"Jesus," says O'Connors to himself. "Hate th'

Corp to hear that. He's gonna take it hard."

Gray opens his eyes:

"What's that, Mike?"

"Th' dope is, Corp, that th' Jerries're tired o' th' war an' gone back to th' Fatherland, an' we're goin' forward to see if it ain't so."

"Who says they've gone?"

"Division, so th' Lootenant says."

"Well, if Division knows all about it, why the hell can't it stand on that?"

"When Division says somethin', Corp, it only thinks it. It leaves it to us to go an' find out."

"What I guess it means is that we make an attack, after an all-night hike an' no grub since yesterday supper."

"May not be nothin', Corp. Maybe it's true th' Jerries've cleaned out an' all we gotta do's walk over there an' git a meal o' sauerkraut."

The soldiers fasten on packs, steady helmets by catching the leather strap underneath chins and stand to along the trench, leaning on rifles.

A whistle blows softly.

"Awright, follow me!" and Jackson swings himself up over the parapet.

The Platoon clambers after him, one by one. In single file, it joins onto the Third Platoon, ahead of it, and creeps silently through the thick, white mist.

"Jesus, that got under way quick," says O'Connors to Gray. "I don't believe most of 'em know where th' hell they're goin', at all. I wouldn't 'a' if I hadn't happened to hear th' Lootenant talkin' to th' Sarge."

"Don't jam up," warns Jackson, moving along on the outside of the file.

"Corp," says O'Connors. "Can't you see Joseffi now, lyin' in a big, soft bed, in a big, safe hospital, somewhere 'way off in th' rear?"

"Wish I was him," the Corporal answers. "I'd change places with him gladly, at just this minute, hole in his chest an' all."

A breath of wind passes across the file and the mist lifts. It disappears in streaks, as when a window is opened in a smoky room.

"God dam' it," says Gray. "Why couldn't that've stayed down!"

"Jus' so it don't bring on any shellin' I'll not kick," says O'Connors. "I'll fight machine-guns, but a guy can't fight shells."

The visibility reveals the rolling scrubby country, pocked with shell-holes and unkempt with split trees. Ahead, lie the low, wide bands of enemy wire, in three distinct lines. About a kilometer beyond is the barely discernible enemy trench. The soldiers know where it is better than they can see it, for they know it stretches between three shattered villages that stand

out on top of the hill. Closer, towards the left, is the point of a patch of woods towards which the file heads. A narrow-gauge railway, torn in places by shell-fire, goes into it on its nearer side, juts out on its farther side and runs off towards the enemy front.

Tensely, as the file goes slowly, steadily on, the soldiers await machine-gun, shell-fire or some sign of the enemy. They look about nervously. They grip rifles at the ready. Here and there, the files thumb across the safety catches, so that the pieces are cocked and ready to go off at a squeeze of the trigger.

"God, I feel naked out here now," says Gray.

He watches the Lieutenant come along and stop beside Jackson.

"Christ, Jack," he hears the Lieutenant say. "If there're any Boche over there, this is suicide. An' for all we know, there're machine-guns out in front of that wire. 'Fact, I believe there are, judgin' by the reports of our night patrols—last trip up."

"Yes, sir," Gray interrupts. "I know there's—or there was—a machine-gun nest about a quarter mile off, over there, beyond that ravine. O'Connors and I got caught there one night, when one of my men got wounded . . . Sergeant, you remember, when Novelli got hit?"

"That's right, Gray . . . Say, Lieutenant, I don't like it. I think it's goddam foolishness for th'

whole Company to go across like this. Let's get into that woods, an' then decide what?"

"Don't want to go against Division's orders," says the Lieutenant. "Don't want 'em to think we're afraid to go over there." Perplexed, he puts his hand up to his forehead. "I don't like the quiet, Jack. It may mean they're simply waiting for us to come on. We'll get under cover of that woods."

He swings around and hurries away forward. The column goes on, veering slightly towards the left, now, so as to penetrate into the nearest point of the woods.

"Jesus, Mike, it's getting on my nerves," says Gray.

"Yeah, Corp, it looks like there might be somethin' phoney 'bout it all."

They see the head of the file disappear into the brown foliage of the patch of woods.

Beyond, the three broken villages stand out clear-cut and white in the full reflection of the late afternoon sunlight. Not a sign of life shows along that barely perceptible enemy trench-line. Over all is silence . . . shattered, suddenly, by the quick, curt clatter of a machine-gun. Another joins in, another and another—the sound traveling in a semi-circle around the column of files. Now it settles into a steady, uninterrupted riveting.

Out in the open, some of the files go down. Those

who stand, look about them. The country looks no different from what it did a few minutes ago. They see nothing to shoot at. They break, and run towards the edge of the woods. The column is thinned out faster than it disappears into the woods, as files totter and flop along the way.

Gray and O'Connors, at the end of the column, are cut off from the rest. O'Connors puts his rifle to his shoulder and fires into the country. Gray looks about him.

"Quick! Into that pipe!" he calls, and dives into a large, round, cement pipe that forms a culvert under the narrow-gauge.

O'Connors quits firing and jumps after the Corporal. They crawl through the pipe to its farther end, turn around and look out forward. They get a limited, round field of view. Two figures appear against the ground. One crawls slowly out of sight. The other remains there, motionless.

"D'you get hit, Mike?"

"No—how 'bout you?"

"Something bumped me in the hip—felt like a mule's kick." He reaches down and touches his right hip. "Yeah, something must've hit me there." He sees his hand is clean. "But it can't be much or blood would've soaked through by now. Stone or a ricochet, I guess."

They look out through the pipe. O'Connors

trains his Chauchat through it on one side; Gray, his rifle on the other.

"Christ, that happened quick," says O'Connors. "Whadda you suppose happened to th' Company?"

"Knocked off, I guess, 'cepting those on the edge and inside the woods."

"Listen, Corp, th' machine-guns're stoppin'."

Blunt, German helmets appear in the circular field of view, coming from over the edge of rising ground. They grow into faces and shoulders.

"Shall I open up, Corp?" O'Connors whispers.

"For God's sake, no—they've got litters. They're coming for our wounded. Lie tight an' see what happens."

The Germans—four of them—come into full view. They open two litters, and squat beside the single American who lies within the circular field of view of Gray and O'Connors. One of the Germans shakes the American by the arm. They leave him, take up the litters and disappear out of sight.

The two in the pipe breathe quietly, until they no longer hear the opening of the litters and the sound of the lifting of heavy bodies and the occasional groans of the wounded.

"Guess he's dead—that one out there," O'Connors whispers. "C'n you see who he is, Corp?"

"No, his face is turned away. Hope it's not Jack-

son. Forget who was close to us when they opened up."

"What'll we do now, Corp?"

"Lay low until dark. Guess they don't know anything about us—never saw us slide in here."

"Corp, you sure saved our skins when you kep' me from openin' up on 'em then. You got a good head on yer shoulders, Corp."

3

O'Connors awakes in the dark, with the idea that he lies at the bottom of the trench. He rises and bumps his head.

"My God, we're still in th' pipe. Corp—Corp," he whispers. "Come to! We must 'a' fallen asleep. It's night already. We better git outa here."

"What's that, Mike?" Gray asks, sleepily. "Christ, are we still out here?" He reaches up his arm and feels the top of the pipe. "Let's go."

They crawl out of the pipe and along the side of the narrow-gauge, towards the patch of woods. When flares go up over the enemy line, they lie still. By their light, scattered on the other side of the track, they see the huddled forms of M Company's dead.

"God, Corp, but we come near joinin' 'em!"

"Ten of 'em, I count, Mike."

"It's a shame to leave 'em there."

"Got to. The Dutchmen'll bury 'em in their own good time, I guess. If we go over there, we'll get shot sure."

By the edge of the woods, lying partly across the railway track, is the Lieutenant's body.

"He got his, too. Christ, it wuz a dam' crime to send us up here that way, sayin' th' Boche'd got out."

They penetrate the woods carefully, swerve towards the left and follow its edge until the patch ends and they again stand on the edge of the open.

"Which way, exactly, you guess th' lines are, Corp?"

"Do you see a dark line there?" Gray points. "That must be our Front—can't see what else it'd be."

"Awright, let's head fer it—'long this narrow-gauge—must run back to our lines, too. Christ, there's no end o' narrow-gauges runnin' 'round here."

"Freeze when the flares go up. It's going to be nasty until we get across the open."

Crouchingly, they proceed along the narrow-gauge, taking advantage of what cover it may give them against enemy eyes. During a pause, while they wait for the light of a flare to fade, Gray, who is peering ahead, whispers:

"Mike, take a look when the next flare comes an'

see if you don't think those're our helmets showing above the dark line? We don't want to run into any Boche line by mistake. Things're kind of mixed up to-day."

"Check, Corp," says O'Connors after the next flare opens out. "Let's push on quick."

Closer, Gray begins to call softly:

"Don't shoot there—two survivors of M Company coming in—can you hear?"

"What's that?" asks a voice out of the trench.

They hear the cock of a rifle.

"For God's sake don't shoot!" Gray calls loudly. "We're Americans!"

"Awright. Come on, but put up yer arms. I'm not takin' no chances."

Gray and O'Connors sling rifles over shoulders, raise their arms and go forward. When within twenty yards of the trench, a shell screams and they flop. It explodes on the other side of the narrow-gauge just across from them.

"Christ, Corp, d'you guess they've spotted us an' 're snipin' at us wit' the'r 77's?"

Any reply is lost in the crescendo roar and burst of another shell. The two hug the ground beside the narrow-gauge, while successive salvos explode ten yards away.

"God, Mike, I wish we'd gotten in the trench before this happened," Gray says during a momen-

tary pause. "It'd be hell to get knocked off now."

"Should we run fer it now, Corp?" O'Connors' voice sounds panicky.

"No—too risky—better stick it out here."

Another salvo comes. There seems to be no perceptible pause between the scream of each shell and its burst. The two Squad mates jam their bodies against the metal ties of the narrow-gauge, using that slight elevation as protection against the whining bits of jagged shell casing which fly through the air after each burst.

"Guess it's lucky we're so close," Gray mutters into the ground. "The spray seems to be going over us."

As suddenly as it began, the shelling ends. The Corporal looks around for O'Connors. He isn't there, where he last saw him, where he felt him during the ordeal. He hears a moaning and sees O'Connors, several yards out from the narrow-gauge, rolling to and fro on the ground. He clutches his breast with his hands and moans.

"Mike, you hit?"

He gets no answer and crawls over.

"Where'd you get it, Mike?"

O'Connors' jaw works up and down, but the only sounds that come out of his mouth are moans. Foam forms about his lips.

"Say, there in the trench!" Gray shouts. "One

of us here's wounded. Can you bring a litter?"

"Awright—comin'!"

Gray turns back to O'Connors, who raises his head and begins to bite at his blouse.

"Mike, for God's sake, what's the matter? Don't do that. Say something."

The Corporal reaches over to touch him and O'Connors snaps at his hand. He draws it back in horror.

"What's th' trouble?" asks one of two litter bearers who come up. "That shellin' get one of you?"

"Don' know whether he's hit or not," Gray answers. "But he's gone all wrong."

"Where you two from?" the litter bearer asks, with a trace of suspicion.

"M Company. Made an attack early in the afternoon an' got shot to pieces."

"Yeah, we heard about that. There's sixteen of you got back—came through th' woods onto the line right here."

"That many got back, did they?"

"Yeah, how-come you didn't come along with th' rest?"

"We got cut off from the rest an' had to lay low until dark."

"Christ, you've had a helluva day. No wonder he's gone crazy . . . well, come on." He turns to O'Connors. "We're goin' to git you back now"

O'Connors looks at them with mad eyes. The foam has thickened about his mouth and is now flecked with blood. He tries to bite as they lift him onto the litter, so that Gray has to hold onto his head. As they carry the heavy litter towards the trench, he thrashes frantically, buckles and kicks out with his legs in a kind of rhythm. He keeps trying to bite Gray's hands. With one hand, the Corporal holds him on the litter. With the other, he holds his head by his hair.

"Punch him," says one of the litter bearers. "That's th' only way to handle him."

"Jesus, I can't," Gray answers. "We've been buddies during the whole dam' business. I can't hit him. It's bad enough to see him go like that."

"That's a lotta hooey, seems to me," says one of the litter bearers, "what we're told about a guy gittin' used to fire. As I see it, th' longer a feller goes on in this goddam war, th' worse he gits an' th' less he c'n stand up agenst it."

"An' he was the toughest guy in the Squad," says Gray, who walks bent over, for O'Connors has gripped his blouse. "An' he goes like that, without a scratch on his body, far as we can see."

O'Connors seems in a stupor now. He lies listlessly on the litter, turning only his head as he glares madly at Gray and the two litter bearers.

They reach the trench and rest the heavy litter along the parapet.

"Where's th' Dressin' Station?" Gray asks. "What company's this, anyhow?"

"C Company."

"Hell, we got a long way off from our old sector. Our Dressin' Station was in Xammes. Where's yours?"

"Ours 's in Beney, but th' ambulances come up closer'n that—to a road that runs into th' narrow-gauge a couple o' hundred yards back. If we have luck, there'll be an ambulance waitin' there. There's a good dugout there, with a couple o' medicos in it, anyhow. They'll take care o' him."

"All right. Will you fellows come on back with me?"

"Sure."

They lift the litter across the trench and continue along the narrow-gauge, until they see the silhouette of an ambulance, close to the track.

"I guess that shellin' got some others, up an' down th' line."

"Don't go yet!" Gray calls, as he hears the motor of the ambulance start up. "Got another wounded man here!"

The engine sputters and stops, and the driver jumps out.

"What's his trouble?" he asks.

"Gone cuckoo," one of the litter bearers replies.

The ambulance driver leans over O'Connors and looks at his glazed eyes.

"Jesus, he has got it bad. I've got one empty place behind. Wait a shake."

He opens the rear doors of the ambulance and takes out an empty litter.

"Take this back with you. We'll lift him in on your litter."

As they raise O'Connors, he swings out at them with his two fists.

"You bastards, I'll git you yet!" he shouts. "I'm not yeller—gimme a rifle!" and he laughs hysterically.

"Easy, mate," cautions the ambulance driver, as big a man as O'Connors. "You can't act thataway 'round here. You gotta be gentle with us. We ain't Germans."

O'Connors tries to get off the litter. The ambulance driver swings on him and punches him over the temple. The blow lands with a crack and O'Connors crumples up.

"Oh, Jesus, I hate to see him treated like that!" says Gray, angered.

"Can't help it, soldier, he's got to behave. I've had plenty of these shell-shocks an' that's the only way we can handle 'em when they get rough. I've

got a couple of broken-bone cases in behind there I've got to look out for."

"What's the trouble out there?" calls a petulant voice from inside the ambulance. "Ain't we ever gonna get off?"

"An' I'm bleedin' like hell," adds another. "I'm gonna die if I don't get some 'tention soon. It's hours since I was hit."

"Hear that?" says the driver. "I've got to get along now. Up with him!"

They swing the inert litter into the ambulance. The driver slams the door and Gray realizes, suddenly, that he is the only member left out of the Last Squad.

"Say," he says to the driver, as the latter gets onto his seat. "Can I ride back to Beney with you? My Company was shot to pieces to-day—I've no Squad left an' nowhere to go?"

"That's right—take him along," the litter bearers say. "He's bin through a bit o' hell to-day."

"Hop up," says the driver. "Quick."

"Thanks for the help," Gray calls after the litter bearers, as the light, Ford ambulance backs 'round and jumps forward.

"Yer welcome, Corp'ril—good luck."

The ambulance driver pushes his throttle far up as some shells siren overhead and burst in a field some hundred yards off the road. As the light car bumps

and jolts, Gray can hear the complaints of the patients behind, crying out in pain. He listens for O'Connors' voice.

"Guess he hasn't come to yet. That was an awful wallop you gave him."

"Had to. Have to do a lot of things we don't want to in this war. . . . Hold on now, we've got to run like hell to get out of here."

The driver is hunched over the wheel. The ambulance careens and suddenly swerves wide. Gray looks out. On the road, black against the macadam, is the body of a soldier—armless, headless.

"Been there all day," remarks the driver. "Ration detail—direct hit—guess—wish some one'd take 'im away—we can't stop on this stretch—th' Boche're always shellin' it."

Around a turn, Beney comes into sight and the ambulance slows down.

"You say you were in that M Company affair, huh?" the driver asks.

"Yeah, it was terrible."

"I heard something 'bout it. They told you th' Boche'd pulled out an' sent you up to attack th' Hindenburg line, eh?"

"Yeah—a dirty shame."

"There's a lotta goddam fools behind th' lines. They don't know anything at all about what's up ahead. How many casualties, you say?"

"Counted ten lying out there as we came back. An' I guess a good many more'n that were wounded."

"What became o' them? I didn't handle any."

"Hell, no, th' Boche came out an' carried them off."

"Don't say?"

"An' sixteen got back—not counting O'Connors—in back there—an' me—so those two litter bearers told me."

"Where're they?"

"Haven't an idea."

"Where's your C.O.?"

"Lying out there. Lying part way across that other narrow-gauge. He's the last one we saw when we got out."

"You have had a hell of a time of it."

"Yeah, I feel nervous an' kind of shaken up. I'm going to try to get something to eat an' some sleep in Beney. I'm not good for anything more to-night."

"Shouldn't think you would be, Corp'ril. You better come right long with me, an' mess with our outfit. I can fix you up with a litter for the night, too."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate that."

"You heard about th' armistice, I guess?"

"No, only some lousy rumors a couple of days ago."

"Hell, it's authentic now. Goes into effect at eleven o'clock to-morrow mornin'."

"Jesus! . . . No one's going to get me back on the Front to-night. . . . My God, an' I never came nearer getting killed than I did this afternoon!"

4

Gray can't sleep. He twists restlessly to and fro on the litter given him by the ambulance driver down in the Sanitary Company's dugout in Beney. Nor could he eat more than a few spoonfuls of the mess of slum the driver had handed him in his own mess can.

"I think I'll go out an' look around," he says. "I can't seem to sleep."

"All right, buddy, but watch yourself," says the ambulance driver, one of several who sprawl on litters and smoke, as they await calls to take their cars up forward to fetch cases. "You're pretty near all in, an' you'll go the way of your pal I carried back if you ain't careful."

"Oh, I'm all right. I'll be back later on. I just want to see if I can find some of my Company."

"No one's gonna force you to stay here with us, only don't get yourself in trouble. You've already been in enough trouble for one day."

"That's right," says Gray, as he pulls aside the gas curtain and mounts the stairs.

He wanders aimlessly down the village street.

"I'm not all right, though," he says to himself. "Feel like I may be going queer, too—feel all churned up—an' my head feels funny. Hell! I'd like to find some one out of M Company—Sergeant Jackson—any one. Can't seem to get away from those ten bundles—seem to see 'em all the time. Seems awful to've left 'em there—maybe some were still alive—may've only faked it when those litter bearers came out. God! Hate to think of 'em out there—Jackson may've been among 'em—wonder if he got it—or maybe the Germans took him away—or he may've gotten back—wish he'd turn up now—it's hell to be all alone like this . . ."

The light of the flares, that go up with ceaseless persistency over the enemy line, reaches weakly back into Beney and shows the white faces of the houses, with black, gaping windows, that stretch up and down the village street. Far away, machine-guns tap, and occasionally a spent bullet drones overhead, smacks against a tile roof or ricochets, whining, off a house-front. Along the road, beyond the village, a battery opens fire with a single salvo. In the quiet which succeeds, Gray hears the explosions of three enemy shells and a dud—somewhere in the fields outside Beney.

"That doesn't sound a lot like an armistice," he says. "I guess that's all bunk."

No one appears up or down the village road. He feels as if he had the entire place to himself.

"Where can those sixteen from M company be? Suppose they could've gone to Xammes? Or stayed up on the line?"

That thought twinges his conscience for a moment.

"Hell, no, I'm not going back up to-night. It was a dam' close squeak this afternoon, an' I'm not going to be killed to-night—just if there should be an armistice to-morrow."

He sees a figure emerge out of a house.

"Say, you from M Company, by any chance?" he calls out.

"Hell, no, 1003rd Sanitary."

"Seen any one from M Company, 1011th Infantry around here?"

"No, th' doughboys're all up on th' line to-night." The soldier finishes what he came out for and goes back into the house.

Gray wanders on, up one side of the street and down the other.

"I'm not right, that's sure. There's something going wrong."

He sees a point of light—a hole in a blanket hung over the ground floor window of a house. He approaches and calls through the hole:

"Any one from M Company, 1011th Infantry in there?"

"No, this is th' Sanitary. M Company got shot to hell to-day when it went out to take th' Hindenburg line all by its lonesome. . . . Who th' hell're you? Come on in, if you got any jack, an' join th' game."

Gray goes through the entrance and stumbles in the darkness until the door of a room opens and light floods out into the hallway.

"What outfit're you from, buddy? . . . Say, you don't look right? What's th' trouble? You look all in?"

"I'm lookin' for some one out of M Company. I don't want to be all alone any longer."

"Say, feller, 're you outa M Company?"

"Yes—M Company—Sergeant Jackson—any one out of M Company—the C.O. would do, but he can't be around here—he got knocked off—saw him last thing—lying halfway across that narrow-gauge."

"Say, buddy, you better bunk down here. You ain't right. War's over to-morrer, you know. Don't wanta get bumped off to-night. Ain't safe to wander 'round outside there."

The soldier indicates a clear space on the floor.

"I can't sleep—tried that already. Can't eat either—tried that, too. What I'm looking for, I tell you, is some one out of M Company—fellow can't fight the whole dam' war all alone. I used to have a Squad—now I'm the only one left—O'Connors left me to-

night—went crazy—tried to bite me . . . but you say you haven't seen any one out of M Company—Sergeant Jackson—any one out of the Company—doesn't matter who . . ."

"Now, buddy, you take it quiet. Lie down there an' put a blanket over you an' go to sleep an' you'll be all hunkydory when you wake up in th' mornin'."

Gray yields to the pressure of the other's hands and lies down. The soldier throws a blanket over him, blows out a candle burning on a box near by, and goes to the other end of the room. A crap game goes on there. A group kneels on the floor, heads together, beside another box and candle. For a long time, Gray listens to the voices. They cease, the candle goes out and he hears the others roll up in blankets on the floor. The dark and the quiet renew his restlessness. He sees those ten bundles again, lying out there in the dark and the cold, with the flares lighting them up from time to time. He mutters to himself:

"Mike an' I ought've done something 'bout them. One or two might've been alive, an' maybe one of them was Jackson. . . . An' the war over to-morrow . . . I wonder?"

"Shut up, there, goddam it!" calls a voice. "Yer keepin' a fellow awake. What's th' idea, anyhow? Ain't we done our day's work. I've lost count o' how

many trips up an' back I've made, an' through some dam' dirty shellin', too."

Again Gray tries to sleep. He can't, and it makes him even more nervous to lie in the dark and listen to the heavy breathing that comes out of it. He gets up quietly, sneaks out through the door into the hallway and outside, where a flare brightens the village at the moment he emerges. He wanders along the village road. He trembles with chill.

"I'm not right—that's sure," he mutters. "Only I don't know what to do about it. I don't want to go the way Mike went, but how'm I going to help it? If I could find some one—any one—out of the Company, I think I'd be all right. I wouldn't mind being on the line, even, if I was with the Company. It's this being all alone—detached—like this that makes it so bad."

By the light of a flare, he sees a pile of clothing, lying on the pavement against a house.

"Better salvage an overcoat, anyhow. That might do some good."

He rummages through the pile until he feels a thick wool garment. He pulls it out and slips it on.

"That's better. I'm not going to tremble so much now."

He goes on, wandering, until he hears a voice:

"He's got on a Boche overcoat!"

He stops and looks up.

"What outfit're you from? What're you wandering around here for?" the voice asks sharply.

Gray sees two figures before him. On the shoulders of one are the gold oak leaves of a Major; on the other, the double silver bars of a Captain. He looks at them without replying.

"By God, Captain, d'you think he's a Boche's wandered in here?"

"No, Major, looks to me like he's been under some heavy shell-fire. I've seen 'em like that before. Can't answer a simple question. Sometimes paralyzes power o' speech."

The Major takes Gray by the shoulder and shakes him:

"Can't you talk?"

"Boche—no—I'm no Boche—that's dam' sure—I'm out of M Company—that's why I'm here—I'm lookin' for some one out of M Company—any one out of the Company—Sergeant Jackson or the Lieutenant—only I keep forgetting that he got it—for he's the last one we saw—lying halfway across that narrow-gauge—he must've been the tenth—for we counted ten—Mike an' I—an' he was the last one we saw—but now Mike's gone too—gone looney—an' that ambulance driver hit Mike an awful crack over the temple—an' I didn't like that—for Mike stuck with me to the end—but now he's gone I

haven't any Squad any longer an' I can't find the Company . . . an' I'm all alone an' the war's never gonna end, seems like to me . . ."

He is aware how curiously the two officers look at him. He wants to explain. He straightens himself up.

"Corporal Gray, Sir, Last Squad, Fourth Platoon of M Company, 1011th Infantry. . . ."

He slumps again after that:

"I know I'm not quite right—I don't feel right at all—I feel downright queer—I can't eat—I tried—an' I can't sleep—tried that too—an' now my hip's beginning to hurt again—funny—haven't thought of that since we got under that pipe . . . but it's M Company I'm looking for—some one out of the Company—I'll go back up if the Company's there—it's being all alone like this that's so bad—a fellow can't fight the whole dam' war alone—an' how long is it going on—an' how about that armistice . . ." He feels a grip on his shoulder. He yields to the pressure and walks as the others walk.

"That's all right, lad," he hears a voice say. "I'm going to take you along to M Company. M Company's down here—in this dugout. Soon's you get down here you won't need to worry any longer."

He feels he's underground. He's glad of that, for it's warm. He doesn't tremble any longer. He knows he's safe now, and out of the war. He hears

voices, although he can't distinguish the words very clearly—only snatches:

"Shell shock? No. Just all in, an' damn if he hasn't got a bullet hole through the right hip—M Company—yes—in that mix-up to-day—a mess—too big a strain."

He feels a prick in his arm.

"Sure it's true—at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning—got it from the Divisional Medical Officer."

The voices end, and the lights go out . . .

VIII

An evening, three weeks after the Armistice, Gray sits cross-legged on the floor of a German-built hut, sewing sergeant's chevrons on the sleeve of his blouse.

"What's the outfit doing now?" he asks.

"Salvage!" chorus the sergeants who share the shack with him. "Every dam' day we go out an' clean up th' Salient."

Gray carefully places the bit of cloth with three chevrons on it over the mark left by his former corporal's double stripe—torn off that day last summer when he entered the war.

"Hard work?"

"Hell, no. We make it easy. Why work now th' war's over?" Sergeant Bamberger answers.

"How about grub?"

"Not so good. Guess th' most of it's goin' up to th' Army o' Occupation. We're kinda in th' backwash here. It'd been better for us if we'd been sent on forward."

"Dam' right," another sergeant puts in. "For then we'd had billets an' buckoo frauleins. Ain't so bad here, though, 'cept for th' light eats an' th' mud. There ain't any shells er machine-guns. That's th' main thing.'

"How was th' hospital, Gray?" asks Bamberger. "Pretty soft, huh?"

"Soft's the word. Sheets an' a mattress, real grub an' all the smokes a fellow could use. An' the nurses! It was a pleasure to lie in bed an' look at 'em."

"Hell, I'd wanta done more'n that with 'em, Gray," says Bamberger. "Where were you, anyhow?"

"Place called Angers—half-way across France."

"What's it like, there in th' back areas?" asks one of the others. "I'd like to get back once, an' see it."

"Interesting as hell," Gray answers. "It was a big surprise to me. There're Americans all over—running the trains, laying new railroads, managing depots, an' you can't move without running into the M.P.'s."

"Oh, yeah," says Bamberger. "You can be sure there'd be M.P.'s wherever you'd go. . . . Jesus, th' U.S.'ll own this country before it's through."

"Did you go to Paris?"

"Just passed through it on the way back here."

"What was it like?"

"Hell—never saw anything of it."

"How's that?"

"I was with a detail of about a hundred men under a Second Looey—all of us coming out of the hospital. The Loot wanted to stop an' look around, but he had orders to make a certain train an' we only had time to get from one station to the other."

"I think I'd've gone A.W.O.L. if I'd been that close to it," says Bamberger.

"A couple of the guys did," Gray replies. "An' the M.P.'s brought 'em back so fast they never even missed the train."

"That's service for you," says one of the sergeants. "I guess there was a detail o' M.P.'s on your heels."

"That's how we figured it," says Gray. "Oh, I forgot. I brought a copy of that new A.E.F. sheet back with me—the *Stars and Stripes.* Any of you seen it?"

He takes a newspaper out of his pocket and tosses it over to the group. One of the sergeants opens it out, while the others look over his shoulder.

"Yeah," says the one who holds it. "I've heard about it, but this's th' first copy I've seen."

"When'd you get back, Gray?" Bamberger asks.

"Just this morning."

"They ran you through th' mill fast."

"Yeah, I wouldn't've minded if they'd kept me longer. It's a great place back there in the rear, only I was anxious to get back to the outfit."

"Ain't a hell of a lot of M Company left, though."

"No, it hurt when I saw the outfit lined up for mess to-night. Pretty near every one's a replacement."

"That stunt was a dirty shame," one of the others puts in. "A lot o' good guys lost their lives that

day—on th' tenth o' November—with th' bloody war over th' next mornin'."

"Have you seen any of th' guys who've come back from th' Germans?" Bamberger asks.

"No, who's come back?" Gray asks eagerly.

"Arnold, Pilsner and that Wop outa th' Third Platoon—I forget his name. They were only slightly wounded, an' when th' Armistice came, th' Dutchmen turned 'em loose an' they walked back through our lines."

"They say anything about Jackson? Was he killed, or wounded, do you know?"

"Wounded, they say, but bad an' he's in hospital, somewhere up forward yet."

"Any one heard anything from O'Connors?"

"Yeah, some one saw him back in a hospital. His bean's all right, but he can't speak. Completely lost th' use of his voice."

"That's queer. Funny what shell shock can do. I was a bit looney myself, that night they sent me back. I was going cuckoo fast."

"But you had a machine-gun wound, too, didn't you?" Bamberger asks.

"Yes, but it didn't amount to anything. They never cut it open an' I was all right after a couple of nights' sleep back in the hospital."

"You had tough luck with your Squad, didn't you?"

"You're dam' right. All the others got it—one way or another—three killed, one wounded, one S.I.W., one shell shock, one went to the rear with cold feet, an' I'm the sole survivor. As O'Connors used to say—'That's th' score now.' . . . What do you hear about going home?"

"Only rumors," says Bamberger. "Some say we're goin' home soon, some that we're goin' up to the Rhine an' some that it'll be Russia."

"Why th' hell Russia?" asks some one. "Ain't th' war over?"

"Not there, it ain't. There's some mix-up there between what they call the Bolsheviki and some others."

"Aw, I guess we'll go home. I heard we'd be there for Christmas—or at least New Year's."

"Has any o' you heard about th' prohibition in th' States?" asks one of the sergeants. "Th' whole dam' country's gone dry, they say. Can't get likker nowhere any more."

"A dam' dirty trick to put over on us when we were out o' th' country, fightin' their goddam war."

"It don't scare me. I guess we'll get all we want when we get back."

"Sure, my neighborhood in Ohio used to have local option, but there were always plenty of drunks around."

Gray finishes sewing and puts on his blouse.

"Now you're a regular Sarge, Gray," says Bamberger.

"Yeah, that's something I get out of the war, anyhow."

He goes out into a woods like that the infantry occupied just before its last trip up to the Front. The log shacks, scattered among the trees, are connected, one with another, by neat, corduroy paths with railing on one side. Smoke comes out of crude, tin pipes punched through the sides of the huts.

"It's comfortable enough here, at that," Gray says to himself.

It is a warm night, under a great yellow moon. Gray steps off the path, where leaves rustle underfoot, and dried twigs snap. He leans against a tree, touches the rough bark and breathes the moist fragrance of the woody earth. He looks up through the branches of the trees at the clear, autumn moon.

"God," he says to himself. "It's nice here, an' how we hated these woods last summer! Funny—how peace changes everything."

From one of the huts, through the moonlit woods, sounds a long-drawn, plaintive wail:

> "I wanta go home, I wanta go home—
> I don't wanta go to th' trenches no more—
> I—wanta—go—h-o-o-o-me,"

"Sounds like Allen or Whittaker," Gray thinks. "Wonder where they are now? Wonder if I'll ever see them again—or Mike or Novelli?"

As the wail ends, a voice answers:

"Can it, you apple-knocker. No one ain't gonna send you to th' trenches no more."

Then a chorus of voices from various huts:

"Yer dam' right!"

"Fini la gair!"

"It's home fer us—toot-sweet!"

"It's home, boys, home,
It's home we ought to be-e-e!"

One by one, the voices die down.

"It's quiet," Gray says to himself, as he looks out through the trunks of the trees, beyond the edge of the woods, out towards the northeast, where there was always a glow on the horizon and a rumble of artillery.

"God, but it's good to be alive."

Slowly, he goes back to the sergeants' hut. He can sleep all night. He will get breakfast in the morning. He will be able to sleep always, all night, under cover. He will get enough to eat all his days to come. Life stretches forward deliciously . . .

"God, I'm glad I lived through it!" he mumbles as he approaches the entrance to the hut.

2

M Company, its ranks filled with replacements, marches out of the patch of woods near Beney while the tardy, autumn sun lingers low over the tree-tops.

The loose column of squads crosses a field covered thick and white with hoarfrost. Feet squelch through the coating over the surface and come out clodded with mud. Out on a macadam road, the soldiers stamp off the clods and step springily. They are without equipment and without arms, for they are on their way to salvage the salient—the old Saint-Mihiel Salient. They wear overseas caps, overcoats and brown, knitted gloves.

The files talk:

"Ain't it grand t' be clean?"

"Yeah, but did you hear about Scotty?"

"No?"

"When he went to th' *de*lousin' station they found his O.D. wuz stuck fast to his skin an' they had to soak it off."

"Th' hell they did. I wuzn't no dirtier'n you."

"Don't take it harrrd, Scotty."

"Yer right, we wuz all in th' same boat. Th' war had to end 'fore any of us got a clean shirt."

"Say, didya ever think o' what it's costin' th'

Guv'ment to salvage? Every man's a dollar a day. That's two hundred an' fifty bucks th' Company, a thousand th' Battalion an' three thou th' Regiment."

"It'd do better to take us home than t' keep us over here pickin' up this goddam trash. What th' hell's it worth, now th' goddam war's over?"

"Aw, we're doin' it fer th' Frogs, so's they c'n come back an' work th' fields wit'out blowin' themselves sky-high wit' th' shells."

"Home fer Christmas!" a file shouts out.

"In a pig's pink pie-jamas."

"Home fer New Year's!"

And the answer:

"In a pig's pink pie-jamas."

"Home fer Easter!"

"In a pig's silk pie-jamas."

"Home fer th' Fourth!"

"May-beeee—Soldier!"

Gray swings along on the outside of the Fourth Platoon of M Company. Its members are mostly strangers to him now. He doesn't talk much—until Bamberger drops back from the First Platoon, up ahead, and falls into step beside him.

"Don't think such a hell of a lot of th' new bunch of officers we've got," says Bamberger. "Act like they're just outa Trainin' Camp."

"Yeah," Gray replies. "They're hell on the dress-parade stuff."

"They'd had that knocked out of 'em if they'd been with us durin' th' summer. That stuff went by th' boards quick enough once we hit th' war."

"Their Sam Brownes kind of get my goat, too," says Gray. "They remind me of a dam' fool of an officer up in the Argonne. Wandered up onto the line, looking for Battalion Headquarters, an' got biffed. He didn't know where the hell he was."

"Yeah, I remember that—remember Jackson shoutin' at him to get down."

They crunch along the macadam, hardened by the cold of November.

"Say, Gray, do you ever think of what th' Statue of Liberty'll look like?" Bamberger asks.

"Do I? I see it in my sleep."

"Think we'll put on a parade?"

"Oh, guess so, but it's the day I hit home I'm looking forward to."

"What're you gonna do?"

"I'm going to take a bath—put on a decent suit of clothes—take 'em off an' bathe again—an' put 'em on an' eat a real meal—an' take 'em off again an' take another bath an' put on pyjamas an' crawl into a soft bed between white sheets an' sleep an' sleep an' sleep until I can't sleep any more—an' then loaf an' loaf an' loaf until I can't loaf any more. . . ."

"An' then what?"

"I'm going to college. Had a letter from my

Dad last week—said he was willing to send me—if the war ever ended—it hadn't when he wrote the letter, you see."

"What's your Old Man do?"

"He's in the hardware business."

"Have you heard th' rumor about some of the old non-coms goin' to Trainin' School?"

"No."

"Yep—six non-coms outa every company."

"God, I'd like to get in on that. It'd be great to breeze home with a gold bar on the shoulder, wouldn't it?"

"Dam' tootin'—after all we've been through."

"Say, isn't that Beney, over there?" Gray asks.

"Yeah, recognize it?"

"Just barely—looks different now from that last night I was up there."

"Well, I've got to get up to th' Platoon. We start salvagin' from here. So long, Gray."

"So long, Bamby."

The column halts at a command that comes down from ahead. Lieutenant Jacobs, the new commander of the Fourth Platoon, approaches Gray.

"Sergeant," he says. "Form the Platoon in line of skirmishers. We'll go across the fields here, up to your old front line, make a dump there, and then go on up to the German front. Converge at Dommartin and make another dump there."

"All right, Sir," and Gray salutes.

"Squads left—March! Platoon"—the squads twist around so that the Platoon forms a front facing the side of the road—"Halt!" And Gray calls out again: "Line o' skirmishers—paralleling th' road—six pace interval between men!"

The Platoon spreads out into a single, thin line along the road. Gray waves his arm:

"Forward!"

Just as in the war, the thin line of skirmishers goes across the fields. Only now the soldiers go carelessly, bending over every other moment to pick up some litter of war, or pausing to catch up an old rag of a uniform—American, French or German—on the end of a sharpened stick, like that a city park guard uses to tidy his domain of bits of paper. They sling the refuse over shoulders or bundle it under arms.

Sometimes the line starts a hare and the soldiers hurl hand grenades, bits of shell casing, helmets and rifles after the fleeing animal.

"Tink o' a rabbit stew fer supper, Sergeant!" says a soldier who looks back over his shoulder at Gray.

"Good enough," Gray answers, but to himself, he adds: "Run, rabbit, run—I'm with you—I got your slant last summer."

When Gray sees Sergeant Bamberger, behind the First Platoon, edging over towards him, he goes over

to meet him. Together, they follow in rear of the line of skirmishers.

"There's our old line," Bamberger points. "An' there's th' two narrow-gauges."

"Makes me feel kind of queer to come back here again," says Gray. "When'd the Boche pull out, anyway?"

"Cleaned out right after th' Armistice. Went back to Germany—th' lucky dogs. Wish we c'd get back home as easy."

"Look beyond th' second narrow-gauge," Bamberger goes on. "See those crosses—just off the point of th' woods? That's M Company—nineteen of 'em. Let's go over that way."

"All right."

The two sergeants veer towards the left, so as to strike the cemetery. As they come up to it, Gray takes off his cap.

"The Dutchmen bury 'em?" he asks.

"Guess so, 'cause both identification tags're tacked on th' crosses. Our orders were to bury one tag with th' man an' fix one on th' cross."

"God, Bamby, it makes me feel bad. I don't want to see who all's there. Let's go on."

They head over towards their old trench-line, where the line of skirmishers now unloads its refuse into one huge salvage pile. As Gray and Bamberger pass along the narrow-gauge, Gray points:

"There's what saved O'Connors an' me—see that pipe? We dove in there an' the Boche never saw us."

"You were lucky. You were th' only ones out in th' open who did get back."

"Yeah, Bamby, I'm grateful—to whatever it was got me through alive."

The Platoon is lined up along the trench-line.

"All right," Gray calls. "We'll head 'cross country towards the old German front.

"Say, Bamby," he adds. "Which in hell of those three towns is Dommartin?"

"Th' middle one."

"Converge at the middle one of those towns," he calls to the Platoon.

The line of skirmishers hops across the trench. One of the soldiers, parodying the customary command, calls out:

"Line o' scavengers—March!"

"A helluva way to end a military career," says another. "As a goddam junk man."

"Don't give a dam' how it ends—just so it ends," says another.

Ahead, the country rolls down into a ravine, then up, beyond the three bands of enemy wire, to the summit of the hill, where the faint line of the old enemy trench stretches between the three towns.

"Looks a bit different from that afternoon of th'

tenth—when we headed out across here, eh, Gray?" Bamberger asks.

"Yeah, yet I feel kind of queer."

"So'd I, th' first day we came up," Bamberger replies. "I'm gettin' used to it now. This's th' sixth day we've salvaged over here."

"Over there, beyond that ravine's where O'Connors, Novelli an' I got caught one night out on patrol—when the Wop got his blighty."

"Yeah, I was over there the other day an' saw where th' nest'd been. Th' guns're gone now—th' Dutchmen pulled them back with 'em—but I c'd see where they'd been. There's a concrete dugout there."

"God," says Gray. "It makes me nervous. I swear, I expect a machine-gun to open up on us."

Gray looks forward.

"What's that, Bamby, in front of th' wire?"

"That's a line o' six-inch shells th' engineers've dug up. Th' Boche had their wire mined."

Closer, Gray sees a line of shells that stretches out of sight. Each shell is coupled together with wire. They now lie on the surface of the ground, beside empty holes separated by an interval of a yard.

"My God, I'm glad the Boche opened on us with their machine-guns before we got here," says Gray. "Those shells would've blown us to hell."

"But they wouldn't've wasted a mine like that on

sixty-odd men," Bamberger comments. "That was fixed up for a regular attack. Fritz was in here to stay—if th' Armistice hadn't come along."

"An' Division told us he'd pulled out on the morning of the tenth of November! God, they know a lot back at Division, don't they?"

They go on and work their way through the wire. Caught in one of the bands is a team of two dead horses. They kneel in the wire, their bodies together and their heads thrown out from each other. On their necks are the gashes of shell-fire.

"We hafta salvage them horses?" One of the soldiers grins around at Gray and Bamberger.

"Hell, no!" says Gray. "There ought to be some turkey buzzards come around to do that for us."

"Yeah, if they haven't all died of overeatin' around here by now. Th' war ought've made good pickin's for buzzards," says Bamberger.

Beyond, they come to the former German front. The trench is not dissimilar to that which lies behind them—their old front, back on the next hill—except that, at twenty-yard intervals along this trench-line are concrete dugouts for protection against heavy shell-fire.

Gray and Bamberger jump across the trench and stand on its farther side.

"By God, Bamby, for a fact I expect to see a Fritz poke his face up out of one of those dugouts.

It's hard to believe the war's all over—up here."

He looks about the village, crumpled by their own shell-fire, which lies just in rear of the German trench. On its other edge is a narrow-gauge which runs between the three villages. A dead locomotive stands on the track. Gray can see it between the shattered houses. It stands there, black and empty.

"D'you suppose they had that going here all th' time?" he asks.

"Looks like it. They were fortifying this place like all hell."

In rear of the houses, Gray sees piles of shells in wicker containers, heaps of boxes of Maxim belts, Potato Mashers, all kinds of German arms and ammunition. He turns to speak to Bamberger, but sees his back as he goes off to join his platoon at the other end of the village.

"God, it looks ugly—all that stuff," he says to himself. "I'm damned if I enjoy this salvaging. Now the war's over, I'd like to go to the rear an' get away from all this."

Lieutenant Jacobs comes up.

"Sergeant," he says. "We'll clean up the village now."

"All right, Sir."

The Platoon has made a dump on the main street. The soldiers sit beside it, on doorsteps, and smoke.

Gray blows his whistle.

"Fourth Platoon, assemble here!" and he makes a circular motion with his arm over his head.

As the members of the Platoon come up, he tells them to salvage through the village and bring all stuff back here to the main dump.

"Just pick up the loose stuff," he says. "Leave any big dumps."

He turns to the Lieutenant:

"Isn't that right, Sir?"

"That's right, Sergeant."

The two—the Lieutenant and the Sergeant—stand together on the main street while the Platoon straggles through the village and combs the houses and yards.

"I feel a bit queer up here, Sir," says Gray.

"Should think you might, Sergeant, it's the first time you've been up since the Armistice, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir, an' I don't enjoy it very much. I'd like to get away from it all, now. I'd like to get away from the war. I'm not quite over it yet, I guess."

Gray looks up at the clear, blue sky.

"That connects up with home," he thinks. "Wish I were back home now."

"Look there, Sergeant," he hears the Lieutenant's voice. "There's a pile of stuff the Platoon's walked right by."

Gray lowers his head and looks where the Lieutenant points.

"See that pile of stuff against that house there. Call back a couple of the men to clean it up."

"All right, Sir."

Gray blows his whistle, to recall any members of the Platoon within hearing. He quits the Lieutenant and goes over to the insignificant pile of German clothing, equipment and small arms ammunition.

"I guess some one would've cleaned it up on the way back," he says to himself. "The Lieutenant just wants to be a lieutenant all the time. That's his trouble."

Gray looks down at the pile of junk: blunt helmets, gray uniform blouses, pancake caps encircled with band of scarlet, cheap leather equipment, rifles, bayonets, tangled Maxim belts, Potato Mashers and that type of winged, German grenade which the Americans always called a "Flying Devil."

"Ugly stuff," he says loud. "God, I don't think I'll ever get the look of it out of my mind."

He looks up, sees that none of the Platoon approaches and blows a long blast on his sergeant's whistle.

"I'll look busy, just to please the Lieutenant," he says.

He pokes at the pile with his toe. The mass feels solid.

"God dam' th' stuff!"

A gray, German blouse, stiff with frost, sticks

fast and he kicks at it. It gives, suddenly, and his iron-shod heel comes down hard on one of the German torpedo bombs, lying underneath. His heel lands squarely on the point of the grenade, under which lies a charged detonator . . .

Gray sees fire, is aware of a roar, of intense heat . . . feels lifted into the air . . . flying through space . . . distended like a frog over a pool . . .

. . . . . .

The Lieutenant throws himself on the ground against the base of a house. Bits of metal whine nastily through the air. Through the village, soldiers appear, startled, and run towards the sound of the explosion.

Down the road, thirty yards away, one of them stops short beside a bit of uniform—dark red, wet, its shape unnatural to a mere piece of cloth.

THE END

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